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Ozark Alf, King of the Mountain; or, Featherweight Among the Outlaws.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

Author of "Asa Scott, the Steamboat Boy," "Featherweight," etc., etc.



"OH, FEDDERVATE! FEDDERVATE! LOOK OOP! LOOK OOP! BY SHIMMINY! VOT VAS DOT, ANYHOW!"

Ozark Alf, KING OF THE MOUNTAIN;

OR,

Featherweight Among the Outlaws.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "FEATHERWEIGHT," "ASA SCOTT,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WATCH ON THE CLIFF.

"HALT! Who goes there?"

Sarill and loud this cry rung out from the edge of a rocky plateau high up in the Ozark range in South-western Missouri.

The plateau was but a shelf, backed by the mountain, and the ledge where the sentry was posted was reached from below by a narrow pass, so steep that a horse could scarcely climb it.

It was not to any intruder by way of the pass that the challenge was directed; but the sentry looked toward the left, where a pile of jagged rocks cut off the view of the western edge of the plateau, an edge which was simply the upper limit of a precipitous cliff, reaching sheer down, some three hundred feet, to the bed of a mountain stream.

The challenge was unanswered, and again it rung out upon the night air, sharply and angrily.

Suddenly a dark form arose from behind the pile of jagged rocks. The form might be that of a man, but the face, as visible in the silvery moonlight, was beardless and youthful.

"Who goes there?"

There was no answer to this third challenge, and the dark form was motionless.

The challenger quickly cocked his rifle; but, before he could fire, the intruder vanished.

"Durn my buttons!" exclaimed the sentry, as he rose to his feet, holding his cocked rifle ready for use. "Who was that feller, anyhow? Whar did he come from, and whar has he gone to? He wasn't one of our men, sartin'; but how did any stranger git up thar? This p'int has got to be settled right now."

He stepped to the pile of rocks, and examined them carefully. Then he passed around them, but still saw nothing of the intruder whom he had challenged. He looked over the edge of the cliff, and received the impression of utter darkness and silence.

"Durn my buttons!" he repeated. "Either it was a ghost that I saw, or that feller has tumbled over and smashed hisself to flinders."

His attention was drawn from these meditations by noises in the pass of falling stones and of the snorting of a horse. He hastened back to his post, and challenged again.

"Who goes there?"

This time an answer came, quickly enough, but somewhat breathlessly, as if from a man who was exhausted by climbing, and the head of the man, as he led his horse up the slope, was visible from where the sentry was posted.

"A friend?" was the answer.

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign."

"I have no countersign; but I think you will know my face when I come a little nearer to you."

"I reckon I know your voice," admitted the sentry, as the man approached the edge of the plateau. "Yes, I know your face, too. Ain't your Mr. Creswell, from Memphis?"

"Yes; that is my name—Alfred Creswell—and my son—"

"Your son is Ozark Alf, the captain of our little company. That's all right, sir. Step right up, and I will take keer of yer hoss."

The man who climbed up to the plateau was tall and of large build, though not portly, with a determined look in his face, and with streaks of gray in his hair and beard. He was plainly dressed, and was armed with a rifle and two revolvers. His horse carried a capacious pair of saddle-bags.

"Is not this Dave Soward?" he asked, looking closely at the sentry, and the latter confessed that he was that man.

"How is my son?" inquired Mr. Creswell.

"Oh, Alf is all right. He is well and hearty, and full of life and business, though it's a fact that times have been sorter dull with us lately. Reckon you want to see him, and he will be glad to see you. Do you know the way?"

"I think I have not forgotten it."

"Reckon I had better kinder interjoece yer, anyhow. Come along, Mr. Creswell, and never mind the hoss."

There was clearly no danger that the horse would stray from the plateau, and Mr. Creswell followed his conductor through an opening that looked like a cleft in the rock, rather than a pass.

In the mean time what had become of that ghost or person whose appearance and disappearance had so greatly puzzled Mr. Dave Soward?

If that careful sentry had been a little quicker in his motions, he would have seen a lithe and active young fellow let himself down over the cliff to a narrow ledge a short distance below, where he entered a hole that opened on the ledge.

"I have found 'em now, for sure," he muttered, as he crawled in at the opening; "but I must know where this hole leads to, afore I give up the job."

It was no easy matter to work his way through the dark, narrow, and unknown passage. At places it was high enough to enable him to creep on all fours; at the other places he was obliged to lie down and wriggle through like a worm.

"I hope I won't stir up any rattletail snakes," he said to himself, as he crawled into one of these tight places.

Nearly an hour had passed when he reappeared at the opening of the hole, having managed in the mean time to turn himself so that he came out face foremost, and then the mystery of the means by which he had reached that elevation became apparent.

He swung himself down from point to point of the rugged rock, at times clinging against the cliff like a spider, until he reached the top of a tall tree, which had its roots near the mountain stream, sending its branches far up against the cliff.

The youth seized one of these branches, and swung himself off into the tree, where he gained a secure seat, and paused for a breathing and resting spell. Then he climbed down until there were no more branches to aid him, and finally clasped his arms and legs around the trunk, and slid gradually to the ground.

There he was joined by a short and thick-set man, with a stolid, German countenance, who carried a short and heavy rifle.

"Is dot you, den, at last, Feddervate?" asked the German. "I vas yoost so glad to see you like nefer vas."

"This is my noble self, Herman," replied the youth, "safe and sound, as you see, except a few scratches. But I think, after this little job, that I will have to change my name from Fred Light to Light Fred. I can tell you, Meinherr Schweitopf, that it needed a light foot and a firm hand for the work I have been doing."

"Mit a shtraight head oond a shtout heart, Feddervate. Vot for vas I efer let you go oop to dose places, where notting goes but eakles oond odder flyin' t'ings?"

"You know that I was bound to do it, Herman, and I am apt to go at a thing when I have set my heart on it. But, it was a tough job, and I am glad it is over. I doubt if I would have dared to try it by daylight."

"Not py daylight? Vot you vas gif me, Feddervate? I expect a man can see his way in der daylight."

"That's what's the matter, old boy. In the dark I could only feel, and so there was no danger of getting my head turned. If I had once looked down, you might not have seen me here in this shape. But the job is done, Herman; I got what I went after, and the money the sheriff offered is as good as in my pocket."

"You finds dem fellers, hey?"

"I found the hiding-place, the den, the fort, or whatever you choose to call it, of Ozark Alf and his gang."

"Dot vas a big find, by shiminetty! Tell me all about dot, Feddervate."

"Let us start ahead, first. We will hardly get home by daylight, anyhow."

Featherweight got his rifle, and the two friends mounted their horses, which had been tethered near by, and followed the bed of the stream down the mountain.

"Tell me all about dot, Feddervate," again asked Herman Schweitopf.

"I climbed the cliff, Herman, and I don't care to talk about that job any more. Near the top I found a hole, that looked like a good hiding place, if nothing more. I raised myself up, and at the same time I started up a man who was on watch there, I suppose. I guess he would have shot me if I hadn't got out of his sight mighty quick. I sneaked down into the hole, and heard him when he walked over there and wondered what had become of me."

"I knew that I had found the den, and had a

notion that the hole might lead to it. I crawled in, and that was a pretty tough job, because I was afraid that I might rouse up some snakes, and I don't like to stir up a snake when he has all the advantage on his side. But I didn't stir up any snakes, and after a while I saw a light. When I got to it, I knew that the light came from the inside of a cave. The hole at that end was blocked up with stones, and I guess I might have pulled out some of them; but I wasn't in that business just then. I could see between the stones, though, and I saw some men in the cave."

"Vas dot Ozark Alf dere?" eagerly asked Herman.

"Yes. From what I soon heard, I knew that one of the men was Ozark Alf."

"Vot vas he like? Von of dose pirate fellers dot ve reads about?"

"He was quite a good-looking young man," replied Featherweight. "He reminded me of somebody whom I had seen not long since, and in a few minutes that same somebody came in."

"Who vas dot, Feddervate?"

"I believe I won't tell you any more about that business just now, Herman. It was queer, and I want to think it over. When we get home, you will soon know as much about it as I do."

"Den ve gets home yoost so quick like nefer vas."

So they rode on through the darkness, until the gray streaks of dawn appeared in the east, and until a rosy flush told of the rising sun.

CHAPTER II.

FATHER AND SON.

WHEN Dave Soward had led Mr. Alfred Creswell through the crevice in the rock, the gentleman from Memphis found himself at the entrance to a large and airy cavern.

There were indications that the entrance had been closed against the elements during the winter, and at this time, late in the spring, the cavern was evidently inhabited. It was well supplied with rude but comfortable furniture, including plenty of skins and blankets, and a small but bright fire not only lighted the interior, but gave evidence of recent cooking. Near the fire three men were seated.

Dave Soward pressed in to announce the guest.

"I say, Cap, here's yer dad."

One of the three men arose. He was a bright young fellow, with black hair and eyes and a swarthy complexion, tall and well built, apparently a model of strength and grace.

The announcement of the visitor had been very plain, not to say rude, and in the meeting of father and son there was nothing dramatic or sentimental. They did not rush into each other's arms with exclamations of joy and affection. Not a bit of it.

"Hello, Alf," said the elder. "How goes it?"

"All right, dad," replied the younger, as he stepped forward and shook hands. "Glad to see you. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Dave, you had better go back to your post."

The sentry reluctantly went out, and the visitor was given the softest seat the cavern afforded.

"Now, dad," said the young man, who was no other than the Ozark Alf who has been spoken of, "I reckon you are tired and hungry. Pete will soon get you something to eat, but in the first place you will need a nip, and I can offer you some first class moonshine, oily and old, and the best of it is that it has never paid a cent of tax to the Yankee government."

"It goes straight to the right place," said the elder Creswell, when he had taken a hearty swig at the jug that was handed him. "I see, my son, that you still keep up your wicked and lawless ways."

"Come, now, dad, that's a little too much," said the other, with a merry laugh. "If I thought that my ways were any wickeder than yours, I would quit them right off. Haven't you gobbled up all your brother's property, and don't you mean to hold on to it?"

"It's all for you, Alf. I want to keep it and add to it for your sake."

"All right, but you don't get me to live in Memphis. When we came out of the war a few of us had got so used to bushwhacking that we couldn't quit the business; so we took to the hills and to living off the country. We have made it pay, too, and that is the strong point."

"By the way, Alf," said Mr. Creswell, lowering his voice to a whisper, "how is our friend—your—a—guest—getting on?"

"You may as well speak out, dad. Do you suppose I would try to keep such a thing a se-

cret from my friends here? He is well enough, and bids fair to live forever. But he is dead enough in law, and I propose to keep him so. You are all right in that quarter."

"I am not all right, my son, and that is what I came to speak to you about."

"You want something, then? I thought as much. Spit it out, dad."

"It is about your cousin Sophie. She has slipped the halter."

"The vixen!" exclaimed Alf. "I told you that you would have trouble with that girl."

"She met in Memphis," continued the elder Creswell, "a young man from these parts named Frank Mallory, and fell in love with him. When I shut down on that acquaintance, she ran away, and went to Cairo. I followed her up, but she got away again, assisted by Mallory, a smart boy from up the Ohio, and a big Dutchman. They came to Missouri, and I picked up a set of roughs, and gave them a lively chase; but luck was against me that time, and they beat us at every point. Finally they cleaned out my party, not far from here, and came on to Mallory's home, and I am told that she has married him. Now that she has a husband he may take a notion to look into things, and that will mean ruin for me and a big loss for you. What I want you to do, Alf, is to get hold of her—to capture her—and when she is once in our power, you may be sure that I will bring her to terms."

Ozark Alf frowned darkly, and looked down while he impatiently patted the rocky floor with his foot.

"I don't like the notion of it, dad," he said. "I know something of Frank Mallory, and consider him a fine fellow. He went through the war with Price, and he comes of good stock."

"What has that to do with the matter?" angrily demanded the man from Memphis. "I don't want to be ruined even by an angel."

"I tell you, dad, I don't like the notion of it at all. Not that I pretend to be too good for that sort of thing; but you know what I have had on my hands and in my thoughts for years, and do you suppose I want to dip in any deeper?"

Negotiations were interrupted at this moment by the appearance of Pete, the darky who did the cooking for the occupants of the cavern. He brought for Mr. Creswell a supper of fried pork, potatoes, and corn bread, which engaged the attention of that gentleman for a while.

"So everything must go by the board, Alf," he remarked, when he had finished his repast.

"I don't say that, dad; but I do say that I don't like the notion of it. As long as I stick to my regular business I am all right, but when I go into outside speculations there is no telling how soon I may get broke up. I speak for my partners more than for myself. You know that this affair is no business of theirs."

"But I will make it their business," insisted the man from Memphis. "I will pay them well—in fact liberally."

"Of course you would have to do that, dad. But there is another point. We don't want to bother the people about here, and have never as much as picked up a horse in this neighborhood. If we should make a raid on Frank Mallory's house, and carry off his wife, that would turn them all against us, and they would join in with others who have had good cause to hate us, and hunt us down and root us out."

"The job can be done easier than that, Cap," remarked a man who was known as Precious Pink, and who claimed that the strange cognomen was his rightful name.

"What do you mean, Precious?" asked Ozark Alf.

"Why, Cap, I am about the settlement a good deal, and I know suthing about Frank Mallory's purty wife. Sheriff Jarvis, you see, has been puttin' on airs and gittin' a pianner, and young Missis Mallory has took a notion to teach Jarvis's gal to play onto it. She goes over the reg'lar, gen'ally alone, and I kin find out when she makes her trips. She has to cross a neck o' woods, and it would be jest as easy as lyin' to pick her up and bring her here, 'thout anybody bein' the wiser fur 't."

Ozark Alf regarded this suggestion favorably, though it was evident that he had no real relish for the adventure.

"Well, Precious," he said, "if it can be done in that way, and if you and the others want to take hold of it, I won't try to keep you back."

"As that point is settled," said Mr. Creswell, "give me a place to lie down, and I will sleep better than I have slept for many a night."

CHAPTER III.

A SHARP AND SUDDEN BLOW.

Just as day broke Fred Light and Herman

Schweitopfel rode up to an old-fashioned farmhouse.

Before dismounting they hailed the house, and soon a window was thrown up, and a man in his shirt sleeves looked out.

"Is that you, Featherweight?" he asked.

"It is both of us," replied the youth. "Come down and let us in, Mr. Mallory. We have brought big news, and we are tired and hungry."

They were soon admitted by Frank Mallory, a tall and fine-looking young man, who welcomed them warmly. In a few minutes they were joined by his handsome young wife, and then by his mother, an elderly lady of matronly appearance.

All were overjoyed at seeing Featherweight and his companion, and all were eager to learn where they had been and what they had done.

"You have given us a great relief, Fred," said Sophie Mallory. "Frank has worried about you, and I have prayed for you, ever since you went away."

"I know that they are both hungry, as well as tired," put in Frank's mother, "and I mean to get them some breakfast as soon as I can."

While the good old lady was bustling about with this hospitable purpose, Frank and Sophie Mallory did not attempt to conceal their anxiety to learn what had happened to their friends.

"But I am so glad to see you safe at home," declared Frank, "that I don't really care whether you succeeded or not."

"Oh, that is all right," replied Featherweight. "I got what I went after, you may bet your sweet life."

"What! do you mean to say that you have found the hiding-place of Ozark Alf and his gang?"

"Yes, and I have seen Ozark Alf himself."

"Indeed! What does he look like?"

"He is what I call a real fine-looking young man, and I should hate to have a tussle with him. But, who do you suppose he is?"

"I know nothing of him, Fred, except that he is the leader of the worst band of horse-thieves and land pirates that ever afflicted this region, though I may say for them that they have not made much trouble in this immediate neighborhood."

"You oughtn't to abuse your relatives in that way, Mr. Mallory," remarked Featherweight, with a quizzical smile.

All his auditors showed their astonishment in their looks.

"Relatives!" exclaimed Mallory. "What do you mean by that?"

"Only that Ozark Alf is your cousin by marriage."

Astonishment was no word for the wonder that showed itself in the faces of Frank and Sophie and the old lady. As for Herman, he did not seem to have been born to wonder at anything.

"You are running some sort of a rig on us, my boy," protested Mallory. "I am sure that no cousin of mine can have married that man, because I have no female cousin living."

"But you have married a wife who has a cousin."

Sophie's excitement fairly blazed up.

"It can't be!" she declared. "Surely it can't be that the man you speak of is my cousin Alfred—Alfred Creswell!"

"That is the very chap," replied Featherweight. "I know it is, because I heard him say so. And that ain't all. As I was peepin' in on 'em, who should turn up, Miss Sophie, but that man from Memphis, who put the job up on you in Cairo—your uncle, I mean, Mr. Alfred Creswell."

"My uncle here!" exclaimed Sophie. "Then it is clear that this Ozark Alf must be my cousin Alfred. But I would never have dreamed of such a thing. I saw him two or three times in Memphis, and supposed him to be a very respectable young man, a dealer in horses and cattle."

"That's his business," said the youth; "but it is other folks' hosses and cattle that he deals in, and he gets 'em without payin' for 'em. When I saw your uncle, I knew that some deviltry was on foot, and the fact is that he and this Ozark Alf are puttin' up the worst kind of a job on you. They talked a heap, and some of their talk I couldn't hear, and some of it I couldn't understand; but all the fuss is about property, just as I've told you afore. As near as I could make out, it is your father's property, that your uncle has got hold of, and wants to keep. The upshot of it is that the old man means to get hold of you, and that is the game they are going to play."

Frank Mallory and his young wife were so astonished at these revelations that they did not know what to say, and it was a relief to them all when the old lady called them to breakfast.

Frank and Sophie had no appetites, but Fred Light and Herman were as hungry as wolves, and the lad found time in the course of the meal to give the details of his adventures of the night before.

The meal was hardly finished when there was a vigorous rap at the door, and a tall and heavily-built man entered, who was at once recognized as Squire Jarvis, the sheriff of the county.

Without any ceremony he at once addressed himself to Fred Light.

"A man on my place told me," he said, "that he saw you and your friend ride by early this morning, and I came up as soon as I could to ask what luck you have had."

"Plenty of hard work, but I can't complain of my luck," replied the lad. "I found the people you sent me to look for."

"You did? Well, my boy, I must say that you are a trump. You have beat all the smart chaps in these parts. I have had several men looking for that den, but some of them were too scary, I reckon, and the rest were too stupid. Tell me about it, now, and you may come down to my office and draw your pay as soon as you want to."

Featherweight began at the beginning, and gave the sheriff the entire history of his adventures, including the plot which Alfred Creswell and his son had prepared for getting possession of Sophie.

"You are even smarter than I took you to be, my boy," averred the sheriff, "and I see that you can be relied on to any extent. Of course we can't pretend to attack the gang by the route you took; but we will find some way to get at them, now that we know where to find them."

"From what Fred Light tells me," suggested Mallory, "the attack is likely to come from their side."

"Oh, as for that, I can't believe that they will try to play such a game in this neighborhood, where they have never molested anybody. They would be afraid to set our people against them. If they should try it, it couldn't win, now that we know what to expect. I will send you a strong guard of good men, Mallory, and if Ozard Alf comes here to carry off your wife, he will play directly into our hands."

The sheriff hastened away to organize his guard, and Fred Light and Herman Schweitopfel went to seek the rest which they sorely needed.

Before noon the guard arrived. It was composed of six picked men of the neighborhood, all well armed, and Frank Mallory felt greatly relieved by their presence in the house. His mother was the only person on the place who was nervous and fearful.

Early in the afternoon Sophie said that she would step over to Squire Jarvis's house and give Katie Jarvis her music lesson.

"Hain't you better drop that until after this trouble is over?" queried her husband.

"I don't know why I should," she replied. "That piano is a great comfort to me, and Katie is such an apt scholar that it is a pleasure to teach her. If any robbers or ruffians come here while I am gone, they will get a warmer reception than they look for, and I will be out of their way."

"We need not expect to be bothered by them to-day," decided Frank. "Night is the time they choose for their raids. Well, run along, my dear, if you are anxious to go; but I think you had better tell Katie that she must not expect you again for a few days."

She gave her husband a good-by kiss, and gayly tripped away, leaving him a little uneasy on general principles, though he did not suppose that the least danger would attend her trip to Jarvis's.

At about the middle of the afternoon, Val Mallory, Frank's younger brother, a bright boy of fourteen, was seen coming up the road which Sophie had taken. He walked as if he was in pain, staggering as he came, and his face was bloody and his clothes were covered with dust and dirt.

His mother and brother met him at the gate and helped him into the house, where he was seated in an easy-chair and was given a glass of wine.

He told his story as soon as he could.

He was coming through Becker's woods, across which the path ran that Sophie always took as a short cut when she went to Jarvis's. He heard a woman's cry, and saw three men with horses.

They held a woman who was struggling to get away; but they put her on a horse just as he caught sight of them, and one of them got up behind her, and the other two mounted their horses. He could not see her face, as it was covered with some sort of a cloth; but he knew by the dress that she was his brother's wife.

He ran toward the men and shouted at them; but they put spurs to their horses and came on at a gallop. One of them rode right over him, and he knew that the man intended to ride him down. He was knocked over and knew nothing more for awhile. When he came to himself he was lying in the path, and his face was bloody, and he was sore all over. He had never seen any of the men before, but thought he could give a pretty good description of them. One of them rode behind Sophie, who was in his saddle.

Mrs. Mallory at once sent a mounted messenger for Squire Jarvis, and another for a physician, and hastened to attend to the needs of her injured boy.

The first to arrive was Squire Jarvis, who came in hot haste. He said that Sophie Mallory had not been at his house that day, and he had no doubt that Ozark Alf and his father had put their plan in execution suddenly and effectively.

Frank Mallory was so stunned by this fearful blow, that he was thrown into the deepest dejection, and so dazed that he was for a time incapable of offering any suggestion.

Fred Light and Herman Schweitopfel had been around, and had come down and joined the party. From the description given by Val Mallory, Featherweight was sure that it was Ozark Alf who rode behind Sophie when she was carried away.

"They have struck quick and hard," said the sheriff. "It is no easy matter to get ahead of such men as those. It can't be that they mean to run the lady right off from here."

"I don't believe they do," asserted Featherweight. "As near as I could get at it, their notion was to take her up there to the den."

"Well, I will start out at once and alarm the neighborhood. All the people who have seen her have fallen in love with Frank's wife, and he has always been a favorite. They will turn out, you may be sure, and we shall have plenty of help. I will be ready to start for the mountains by daybreak, and we must take you along, my boy, to show us the way."

"My friend Herman can do that as well as I can," said Fred. "Anyhow, he can show you as much as I could. For my part, Mr. Jarvis, I don't mean to wait for you."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going up into the hills to-night, as I went last night. I mean to find out where Miss Sophie is, and to keep an eye on her."

CHAPTER IV.

SOPHIE AT BAY.

THE capture of Sophie Mallory proved to be, as Precious Pink had predicted it would, a very easy matter.

While her friends had not supposed that Ozark Alf and his band could have the slightest acquaintance with her habits and her movements, her enemies struck speedily and with knowledge.

They had only to tether their horses in the woods through which she was accustomed to pass, and to lie in wait by the side of the road which she was accustomed to follow, and the rest was the work of but a few minutes. What had become of her would have been merely matter for guesswork, had it not been for the appearance on the scene of Val Mallory, and the vicious attempt to ride him down had not destroyed the boy's ability to report the event.

Bound and gagged, and mounted before one of the most expert horsemen in the country, she was helplessly carried far from her home and her friends.

Her captors wore no masks, as they did not fear recognition; but they chose bypaths, and routes that were covered by timber, as they had no desire to attract attention. Only once on their way to the mountains did they meet any person, and that was a man who stopped and stared at them as they were crossing a public road. But that was at a considerable distance from the Mallory homestead, and the man need not have supposed that the lady, although she was riding in a strange fashion, was a captive, as the covering of her face might well be mistaken for a veil.

It was late in the afternoon when they began to ascend the mountains, where they considered themselves absolutely safe, and it was not more than two hours after dark when they climbed

the difficult pass that led to their cavern fortress.

Alfred Creswell was eagerly awaiting their arrival. He had been oppressed by anxiety ever since the men started on their evil errand, fearing that they might fail, and that their attempt would so frighten the friends of his niece that they would hurry her out of the country.

As night approached, he paced the plateau excitedly, stopping every now and then at the head of the pass to look down the defile, and even putting his head to the ground to listen.

"Durned if I don't believe the old gentleman has got the itch or the St. Vitus's dance," muttered Dave Soward, who was again keeping watch on the plateau. "It's enough to give a feller the hyp; jest to look at him."

As the night advanced he grew more impatient. But at last, after listening intently at the head of the pass, he jumped up with an exclamation of profane joy.

"They are coming!" he said.

They were indeed coming. Soon the tread of the horses was heard as they toiled up the steep and uneven way, and in a few minutes the first of them made its appearance on the plateau, bearing a double burden, a man and a woman. The bandage had been removed from Sophie's mouth, but her face was still covered.

"Have you really got her, my son?" asked the man from Memphis.

"Of course I have," replied Ozark Alf.

"Thank the Lord for that!"

"Better thank the devil!" growled the young man, as he dismounted and took Sophie down from her saddle.

She was led through the cleft in the rock and into the cavern, where she was given a comfortable seat, and the covering was removed from her face. There was a bright fire burning in the cavern, and she easily recognized her uncle and her cousin.

"So it is really you, then," she said, addressing herself to Ozark Alf. "I could not believe it when I was told that you were the chief of a band of robbers; but now I see that it was the truth."

"I can't guess how you ever heard that," remarked her cousin.

"But I did hear it, and I knew, too, that you would try to do the very thing that you have done, though I would not have thought that you would do it so soon and in such a sneaking manner. Oh, I have friends, I assure you—friends who are brave and skillful and strong, and you will be made to suffer severely for this outrage."

"We are your nearest relatives and your best friends," remarked Mr. Creswell.

"You, too?" she exclaimed, turning fiercely upon her uncle. "You, who ought to have been my best friend, but have always been my worst enemy—you are still following me up and persecuting me, as if you had not already caused enough trouble and bloodshed on my account. I know that it is useless to make any appeal to your feelings, or to your sense of justice or honor; but I would be glad to know what you expect to gain by tearing me away from my home, my husband and my friends."

"What I have done has been for your own good, entirely for your own good," replied her uncle, "to save you from committing and continuing a great sin and crime."

"What do you mean, sir?" she indignantly asked.

"That man Mallory is not your husband."

"That is a falsehood," she promptly replied.

"I know that we were lawfully married, and there is no mistake about it."

"There is a great mistake about it, my poor child. By your father's will you were prohibited from marrying without my consent. As you married without that consent, the marriage was not a lawful one."

This attack, instead of knocking Sophie down, only seemed to develop her fighting qualities.

"My father's will?" she exclaimed. "That is something that I hear of now for the first time. How does it happen that you never mentioned it to me before? If my father died in poverty, as I have often heard you say, why did he make a will?"

"I have told you that he left you in my care," replied Mr. Creswell.

"It would have been as wise to leave a lamb in the care of a wolf. I do not believe what you tell me, about my marriage. I am neither a child nor a fool. I am of age. What has my father's will to do with the matter? I have known of girls who have married against the will of their parents, when their fathers were living, and the marriages were never disputed.

Your attempt to frighten me on that score has failed, sir."

Mr. Creswell shook his head sadly, and sighed audibly.

"Poor girl!" he said. "She does not understand the peril of her position."

"I do understand it quite too well," she replied. "I understand that my only peril comes from you, and that you alone are responsible for it. I want to know what you expect to gain by stealing me from my home and bringing me here against my will?"

The man from Memphis looked about uneasily and Ozark Alf kept his eyes on the ground; but neither of them spoke. It was clear that Sophie was not to be frightened. Would they be obliged to expose their real purpose to her?

"I want to know," she continued, "what has become of my father's property? I now believe that he did not die a vagabond or in poverty, as you have often told me. Where is his property? Have you taken possession of it, and do you mean to cling to it? Is it for this purpose that you have followed me up so closely? If so, you may as well make a clean breast of it. Tell me why you have brought me here, and what you want me to do."

Alfred Creswell had been considering the matter while she talked, and had settled upon the plan he meant to pursue.

"It is true," he said, "that your father did own a little piece of property in Memphis; but it was such a small affair that I never thought it worth speaking about. It is only a part of a lot; but I have built about it in such a way that I need it in order to get access to my own property. Its value cannot be more than three hundred dollars, and I will give you five hundred if you will assign your right to me."

"Is that all you want?" demanded Sophie.

"That is all. As there is so little property, I will put the instrument in the form of a general release to me of your interest in your father's estate. When you have signed this, you can return at once to the place you call your home and the man you call your husband."

"What if I refuse to sign it?"

"In that case it will probably be a long time before you see either of them, if ever."

"I shall not sign anything of the kind," firmly announced Sophie. "I believe that I now understand fully your meaning. There is property that my father left, and it is no small matter. It is not for any little piece of ground that you have followed me up and committed this outrage. I have rights, and I will not sign one of them away to you."

"Then you may expect to take up your quarters here until you get over your obstinacy," remarked Mr. Creswell.

"I am not afraid. I have friends who will find me out, and they will make you pay dearly for your treatment of me."

"We are not worried about your friends, coz," assured Ozark Alf, breaking his long silence. "It would take an army to capture this fort of mine."

"We will let her sleep over it," said the man from Memphis. "Where shall she lodge to-night?"

"Oh, there is plenty of room in this hotel. She shall have an apartment to herself."

"You know, Alf, that you must not let your—your guest—come near her."

"No danger of that, dad. Come, and I will show you the place. Never mind her. She is as safe in this room as if she was sealed up in a bottle."

The two men went into another portion of the cavern, leaving Sophie to her reflections.

But she did not have much time to reflect.

A short, sharp, but low whistle, that seemed to come from the rocky floor under her feet, caused her to start and turn her head, wondering where the sound had come from.

Then there was a voice, low and distinct.

"Miss Sophie!"

She was thoroughly bewildered. Who could it be that was seeking to communicate with her at such a place and time?

"Who is it?" she asked, in a startled whisper.

"It's Featherweight, Miss Sophie. I'm on hand, and I've come to stay, bet your eyes! Don't be afraid, and don't you think of givin' in. We will get at those chaps, and make a scatteration of 'em, sure's you're born. All you've got to do is to hold your head up and be plucky. That's all. Good-night!"

Ozark Alf and his father returned immediately, and found their prisoner looking remarkably bright and cheerful.

"You look as cheerful as if you had heard some good news," remarked her uncle.

"Perhaps I have," replied Sophie; "but the

best news I could hear just now would be news of something to eat."

"You shall have your supper directly, and then your sleep, and in the morning I hope you will repent of your obstinacy."

"It is you who will repent," she retorted, "and that before long, not only of this outrage but of many evil deeds."

CHAPTER V.

FEATHERWEIGHT IN A BAD BOX.

FEATHERWEIGHT lost no time in beginning the task which he had set himself to do. He resisted the entreaties of Herman Schweitopfel, who was anxious to accompany him, as it was necessary that the German should remain and guide Sheriff Jarvis's party to the mountains. He arranged his rifle so that he could sling it at his back, filled his pockets with cold meat and a supply of cartridges, mounted his horse and set out, followed by the best wishes of his friends.

He was sure that he knew where to find Sophie Mallory, and he meant to follow the same route which he had taken the night before; but it was after dark when he reached the foot of the cliff, and his tiresome and difficult climb to the top was not a matter of a few minutes.

When he reached the hole near the edge of the cliff, he made no attempt to rise to the top of the plateau and survey the situation of affairs up there, but dived right in, and crawled through the narrow passage until the light from the cavern, shining through the chinks of the rocks, told him that he had reached his destination.

Sophie was already there, as he soon discovered, with her uncle and Ozark Alf, and he heard much of the conversation that passed between them—enough to assure him of the firm stand that Sophie had taken, and to cause him to admire her pluck and spirit.

As soon as the two men had left that portion of the cavern, he opened communication with her, telling her that he had come there to watch over her, and that her friends would surely deliver her from her perilous position.

In a few moments he had the satisfaction of knowing, from what her uncle said to her, and from her reply, that his presence there had greatly cheered and encouraged her.

As there seemed to be nothing more for him to do at that time and place, he came to the conclusion, after reflection, that he might as well descend the cliff and get a night's rest in the valley. As he was an expert climber, the undertaking did not seem to him near as difficult as he had at first considered it, and he was certain that the hole into which he had crept would be anything but a comfortable sleeping-place.

He crawled back, and had nearly reached the mouth of the hole, when he heard something that startled him.

He heard voices above him, on the plateau, near the edge of the cliff, and he was sure that one of the voices was that of Ozark Alf.

"I know that there is something wrong, Dave Soward," declared the young chief. "The woman we brought up here to-night said that she knew of what we were going to do, and I am inclined to believe her. I can't suppose that one of our men has turned traitor, and there must have been a spy about here. What was it that you say you saw last night?"

"I told it was a ghost, Cap, but it might ha' been a man. It happened when I was on guard at the head of the pass, jest afore the old gen'leman came. I heard a noise over this way, and I challenged. No answer. I challenged ag'in, and then a man, or what looked like a man, riz up right about whar we're standin', but dropped like a shot afore I could fire. I came around here, and thar warn't nothin' in the shape of a human to be seen, and I hain't made up my mind whether it was a man or a ghost that showed up for a second. If it was a man, he tumbled over thar and smashed himself to flinders. If it was a ghost—well, I don't know much about ghosts, nobow."

"Suppose it was a man, Dave; was there no other way for him to get out of sight?"

Dave scratched his head, and looked around at the walls of rock that shut in the plateau. Then he knelt down and looked over the edge of the cliff.

"Well, I dunno," he said, at last. "Thar's a sort of a hole down here, but I never made no account of it, though Big Jeff did say that he heerd suthin' scramblin' about thar to-night. But it stands to reason that a man couldn't climb the face of that rock, and to git here in any other way 'ud beat my time."

"I think I could climb it, if I had to," said

Ozark Alf. "And you say that Jeff heard a scramblin' here to-night."

"That mought have been a painter, or even a coon."

"If a panther had his home there, Dave, we would have heard his screech at some time, and that is no likely place for a coon. It may be a spy, and this matter ought to be looked into."

"Want me to go down thar, Cap, and make the critter show his hand? All right. I ain't afeard of coons or painters, or even of ghosts; to say nothin' of men. I'll go in thar, Cap, and whatever it is will soon hev to come out or git me out."

Dave Soward examined his pistol carefully, and replaced it in his belt. Then he let himself down over the edge of the cliff to the narrow ledge, and entered the hole head first. Ozark Alf, with his pistol cocked, awaited the result of this singular search.

Featherweight had overheard much of this conversation, which was intensely interesting to him.

As soon as Dave Soward announced his intention of going down to examine the hole in the cliff, the youth drew back and prepared for the worst.

It was certain that he would be discovered. Even if he should retreat to the end of the hole that was next to the cavern, he would be followed and found. Discovery must result in surrender—which was out of the question—or death.

As somebody must die, he was determined that the somebody should not be himself.

In fact, Featherweight, who was not at all fond of retreating, determined to fight it out, and to resist to the utmost extremity.

He crawled back through one of the narrow passages until he reached a place where he could turn, and cocked his rifle, congratulating himself on having brought that weapon, though it had thus far been quite an inconvenience to him.

He had not long to wait. The mouth of the hole was not darkened by the entrance of Dave Soward, being already as dark as it could be; but Featherweight could plainly hear the noise he made as he crawled in, and in a few moments a muttered oath enabled him to locate his antagonist exactly.

He aimed his rifle in the direction of the sound and fired.

The report sounded terribly loud in that confined space, and was followed by a silence which was rendered more oppressive by the sulphurous smell of burned powder.

Featherweight had met his enemy and had made an end of him; but that was not all.

He crept forward through the narrow passage until he touched a human head lying motionless on the cold stone. He drew his hand back with a shudder, for it was slimy with blood.

Brave as the lad was, and always ready to defend himself and his friends to any extremity, there was something very painful to him in the thought that he had killed a man, and it was horrible to find himself alone with the corpse.

More than that—the body must be got out of the way. It blocked up his passage to the free air. If it remained there, he was a prisoner, and the very thought of being shut up in that hole chilled his blood and took his breath away.

The body must be got out of the way; but could he remove it?

At least he could try, and the necessity of the effort pressed upon him forcibly.

He tore off a portion of his shirt and wrapped it around the head of the corpse, so that he should not come in contact with the blood, and began his endeavor to move the limp body backward toward the mouth of the hole.

It was fortunate that he had not allowed the searcher to advance further from the entrance, as his task would then have been impossible. As it was, the labor was not only repulsive, but extremely difficult.

With his utmost exertions he could move the body only a few inches at a time, and every now and then it seemed to jam in the passage, or to catch upon the rocks, in such a way as to make further progress almost impossible.

After using all his strength and skill, he would sink back completely exhausted, covered with perspiration and ready to give up the task in despair. At the same time the air of the hole seemed to become closer, and the sense of being alone in the darkness with the dead man grew more oppressive.

But it was a question of life or death, and he persevered, striving the harder when his labor appeared to be the most hopeless.

It seemed like an age that he was pushing and lifting there, in the most uncomfortable and

inconvenient positions, at that lifeless thing. Probably two hours had passed when he began to perceive, by the greater ease with which he could move his burden, and by the cool breath of night air from the outside, that he had nearly reached the entrance, and that the dead man's legs were hanging over the cliff.

Weak as he was, he put more energy into his work, and, pushing and lifting with all his strength, soon sent the hateful thing clear of his place of concealment. He heard it strike against the cliff as it started on its downward course, and that was the last of it.

Ozark Alf, as he stood on the plateau, heard the dull and muffled sound of Featherweight's rifle, and knew that somebody or something had been shot in the rock under his feet.

He waited for another report, but heard none. The single shot had settled the business, one way or another. He waited for Dave Soward to appear and report the success or failure of his search, but waited in vain. He leaned over the edge of the cliff, listening intently, but heard nothing more.

Then he called out another member of his band, to whom he explained what had happened as far as he could, and directed him to keep a careful watch at that point. Then, with a very uncomfortable feeling to carry with him, the outlaw leader returned to the cavern.

After a while he came back to the plateau, and asked the man whom he had left on guard if he had seen or heard anything.

"Not a thing," was the reply.

Just then they heard something strike against the side of the cliff below them, and go tumbling down in the darkness.

Ozark Alf waited a little while, as it was barely possible that his own man might have been the survivor of the struggle. Then he lost all hope.

"That is the last of Dave Soward," he said. "There is a man down there, Jerry—a spy. Keep a close watch here, and as soon as he sticks his head out of that hole, shoot him!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SIEGE OF THE CLIFF.

SHERIFF JARVIS was as anxious to begin the work that he had set himself to do as his young friend had been about his; but he needed time to perfect his plans and put them in operation.

He started at once to arouse the people of the settlement and enlist a party to act against the outlaws, and this was an easy thing to do.

Those who knew Frank Mallory's handsome and amiable young wife were eager to go in search of her, and those who were not personally acquainted with her were indignant that such an outrage had been committed in that neighborhood.

The sheriff easily found plenty of volunteers, and from those who offered themselves he selected twenty active young men, whom he directed to meet at his house at daybreak the next morning, mounted and armed. The size of Ozark Alf's band was not definitely known, but it was believed that this number of men would be amply sufficient to overcome him.

One of the first at the rendezvous was Frank Mallory, who had thrown off his dejection, and was anxious to follow up the desperadoes and recover his wife.

A prominent portion of the outfit was a mule which Sheriff Jarvis had loaded with provisions.

"This business may turn out to be a regular siege," he said, "and I don't intend that the campaign shall be made a failure by neglect of the commissary department."

At sunrise the party set out, and when they had reached the mountains Herman Schweitopfel guided them to the foot of the cliff which Featherweight had ascended, that they might locate Ozark Alf's stronghold.

As it was clearly impossible to make any sort of an attack from that position, they rode around until they struck a bridle-path which they believed would lead them to the den of the desperadoes.

They slowly toiled up this bridle path, with two scouts in advance and the provision mule in the rear, and it was about noon when they reached the foot of the pass that led to the plateau. Here they stopped to reconnoiter and to consider a plan of operations.

They had been ascending a heavily timbered and not very difficult slope; but here they found their further progress obstructed by high and overhanging cliffs, the climbing of which was clearly out of the question. The only opening through these masses of rock was the steep and narrow pass, which could not be more than thirty or forty yards in length, but presented a

position which a few men could easily defend against many.

Here, then, was a natural fortification, which appeared to be proof against any kind of attack, and the sheriff and his party shook their heads doubtfully as they surveyed it from all possible points of view.

One of the two scouts volunteered to go up the pass and reconnoiter, and was permitted to try the dangerous experiment.

He went in slowly and cautiously, but had gone only a little distance when the sharp crack of a rifle was heard from above. A bullet struck the rock at the side of the pass, scattering bits of lead and fragments of rock about, and the scout quickly and quietly returned to his friends.

"I don't think they tried to hit me," he said. "They only wanted to give me a hint that I had better get away from there."

"The shot tells us that we have found them, anyhow," said Sheriff Jarvis. "But we are like the man whose bucket was at the bottom of the well. It wasn't lost, he said, because he knew where it was; but it might as well have been lost for all the good it did him."

"If dot Feddervate was here," remarked Herman Schweitopfel, "he would find der way in dere mighty quick. Vere was dot Feddervate? I thought I vas see him now poety loon. Aber I hopes dey don't got him already."

Frank Mallory, who had sunk into another fit of dejection, sat on the ground, nervously handling his rifle, and unable to offer any suggestion.

"It is just as I told you this morning, boys," declared the sheriff. "This business has got to come to a regular siege, and it is lucky that I attended to the commissary department. You must picket out your horses wherever you can find a bit of grass, and we will camp right here. I reckon we ought to be able to starve those rascals out, if we can't do any better."

"Perhaps so," replied Mallory, "if this is the only route to their den. But I am afraid that they may hold us off here as long as they have a mind to, and then sneak away by the back door."

"That's so, Frank. But we can only do our best. We must send a few men around to the other side of the mountain, and the rest of us will stay here and watch this rat-hole."

Four men who were well acquainted with the range were sent to search for the rear entrance, if any, to the outlaws' stronghold, and the others settled down at the foot of the pass and prepared for what Sheriff Jarvis styled a regular siege.

A few good marksmen were detailed as skirmishers to send an occasional shot up the pass; but this irregular firing was seldom answered from above, and nobody was hurt on either side.

Thus the day passed without showing any progress, and a quiet night followed, during which no demonstration was made by the besiegers or the besieged.

The next morning Frank Mallory was very restless and impatient. His dejection had given way to a fierce eagerness to make an attack in some shape, and he proposed all sorts of impossible projects.

"I can't stand this much longer," he said. "I am afraid that my wife has already been run off by her infernal scoundrel of an uncle, and that they are only holding us here so that she can be got well out of the way. If we don't get at them before long, you may count on me for something desperate."

Sheriff Jarvis quieted the bereaved husband as well as he could, and begged him to await the return of the four scouts, whose information, if it should prove to be favorable, would be immediately acted upon.

"I don't look for anything from that quarter that will help us," moodily replied Mallory, as he walked away and began another inspection of the rocky fortress that blocked their path.

Herman Schweitopfel was also very anxious and uneasy on account of Featherweight. He was sure that the lad would have found his friends and reported the result of his dangerous expedition, if he had not been killed or captured by the outlaws.

Mallory and the sheriff did not share this uneasiness, but assured Herman that Fred Light would never get into so tight a place that he could not find or force a way out of it.

Shortly after noon the four scouts returned, and their report justified Mallory's forebodings. Ozark Alf's fortress, as well as they could judge of its location from the other side of the mountain, appeared to be entirely inaccessible in that quarter, and they had not been able to find

as much as a bridle-path that led to it, or the slightest indication of a back entrance.

"Just as I expected," remarked Mallory. "But that is not what I call bad news, Frank," said Jarvis. "If there is no back entrance, they can't run off your wife, and we will surely be able to starve them out."

"I doubt that, Captain Jarvis. They would not be likely to shut themselves up in such a place as that, without leaving a hole to crawl out of when this one is closed. Depend upon it, they can get away if they want to. Come, Jim Breen! It's you and I for this work."

Jim Breen was a young Missourian who had spent a considerable portion of his life in Texas as a cowboy or vaquero, and was reputed to be very expert in the use of the lasso.

"Did you bring your lasso, Jim?" asked Mallory.

"Of course I did. I would as soon think of leaving my saddle at home as that."

"Let me show you something, then."

Mallory led him close to the overhanging cliff at the right of the pass, and pointed to its top, where there was a scanty growth of stunted timber.

"Do you see that stump, Jim? The lightning has shattered a cedar up there, and has left a few feet of it standing. Do you see it?"

"Plain enough," replied Breen.

"Do you think you could throw your lasso over that stump?"

"Perhaps I might, if it was long enough."

"We can make it long enough. Captain Jarvis packed a good piece of hemp rope on the mule."

"Are you thinking of climbing up there, Frank? You couldn't hand-over-hand it on my lasso or on a hemp line. Nobody could."

"But we could tie knots to help a man in climbing," suggested Mallory.

"That would make the lasso harder to throw. But we may as well try it, Frank, and I wouldn't advise any man to bet that I can't do it."

It was determined that this experiment should be tried. The hemp rope was securely made fast to the lasso, and knots were tied in both at convenient distances for climbing. Then Jim Breen coiled it as well as he could, and took his stand where he had a clear view of the stump at the summit of the rock.

The first throw was a failure. He had miscalculated the effect of the knots, and the line did not reach the top of the cliff. He put more vigor into the second throw, but missed his aim by casting too far to the right, and the third throw was just as much too far to the left. On the fourth throw the lasso seemed to settle over the stump, but the result showed that it had gone beyond.

"Don't give it up, Jim!" said Mallory, as the ex-vaquero stopped to rest.

Again he straightened himself up to his work, measured the distance carefully with his eye, and let fly the knotted rope. It sailed circling through the air and this time he was sure that he had hit the mark.

"We've got them now!" joyfully exclaimed Mallory, as he ran to the rock and pulled down on the rope.

"What are you going to do, Frank?" asked Sheriff Jarvis.

"I am going up there, and will pull my rifle up after me. Then I will want one or two good climbers to follow me. If I am not greatly mistaken, we will be in a position from which we can fire down on those fellows and drive them to cover. When you hear me yell, the rest of you can charge up the slope."

He threw his coat, and began to climb the knotted rope.

CHAPTER VII.

FEATHERWEIGHT STILL IN A FIX.

WHEN Featherweight had got rid of the body of Dave Soward, he was completely exhausted that for a time he made no attempt to move. Consequently he was near enough to the mouth of the hole to hear Ozark Alf order the man on guard to shoot him if he should stick his head out.

"Then I won't stick my head out," was his inward comment on this instruction.

He crawled back a little distance, and yielded to the overpowering need of rest. He was for the time entirely worn out, in mind as well as in body. The fear that he would not be able to extricate himself from that hole in the rock had shaken him even more than the unpleasant and almost hopeless labor he had been compelled to perform.

He was still a prisoner, but it was one thing to be guarded by a living man who was out of his

reach, and quite another to be shut up as in a tomb by a corpse.

It was possible that another man might be sent in to ferret him out, or that some infernal means which he could not guess at might be used to make an end of him; but these considerations did not annoy him in the least. They simply came to him, and instantly drifted out of his mind, as he sunk on the hard and damp floor of his narrow prison, and was at once lost in a slumber too deep for dreams.

When he awoke he could not judge how long he had slept; but he knew that his sleep although it had rested his body, had not been a refreshment.

The hole was hateful to him since it had become a prison. His bones ached, his flesh was sore, and the close and damp air oppressed him severely.

He crawled toward the entrance for breath, and saw the light of day outside. He wished that he might thrust out his head and feel the sunshine and breathe the fresh air, but was not yet ready to give his life for that privilege. He would even have dared to attempt the descent of the cliff in broad daylight, if he had believed that he could make his escape in that way—if he had not felt sure that he would be shot down.

If he had the slightest doubt on this point, it was soon ended by the voice of Ozark Alf, whom he plainly heard speaking to the guard on the plateau above him.

"Have you seen or heard anything in that hole down there," asked the young leader of the outlaws.

"Hain't neither seen nor heard nothin'," was the reply. "Are you sartin that thar's suthin in thar, Cap?"

"There can't be a doubt of it, I tell you, and I am sure that it must be a man. I heard the report of a gun or a pistol last night, and it is just possible that Dave Soward fired the shot. If so, it may be a panther or something of the sort that is in there. But no such beast would have tumbled poor Dave's body out. Besides, it would have shown itself when day came. It must surely be a man, Pete, and I would give a good sum to know who he is and what he is there for."

"It wouldn't be no fun to try and find out, Cap," remarked the guard.

"That is true enough. After what happened to Dave, I would not want anybody to make the attempt. But we must get even with that cussed spy in some way. I wish I knew where that hole leads to."

"I don't know nothin' about it, Cap, 'ceptin' that it's a hole."

"Is it possible that it runs into our cavern?"

"Should say not. I know all the ins and outs of the place by heart, as you may say, and I've never see'd no sech openin'."

"Well, I will think it over and look about. See to it that you keep a close watch here, Dave, like a cat at a rat-hole, and shoot the sneak if he puts his head out. I reckon we can starve him to death, if we can't get at him in any other way."

All this, although it relieved his mind of any sort of doubt, was not at all consoling to poor Featherweight, who had already begun to wish that he had never seen that wretched hole in which he found himself a close prisoner. They could starve him out, he supposed, in the course of time, and they might try and smoke him out if they should become impatient, and he could do nothing to help himself.

His only hope was in the arrival of his friends and the capture of the outlaws' stronghold; but, from what he knew of the position, he had good reason to believe that the capture, if it could be effected, would require considerable time, and that his case would be settled before that event could come to pass.

In the mean time he was hungry, and he congratulated himself on his forethought in filling his pockets with provisions before he started to the mountains. They would not be likely to starve him out while that supply lasted.

With this thought to cheer him, he took out a portion of the store in his pockets, and began to eat, not ravenously, but with the view of taking enough to sustain nature, and of making the provisions last as long as he reasonably could.

He had eaten but a little when he was seized by a new and sudden fear. He had made a painful discovery.

The provisions that he had brought from Mrs. Mallory's were fried ham and cold biscuits. The salted and smoked ham soon gave him a sensation of thirst, and he remembered that he had nothing to drink. He had not thought to bring a canteen of water.

This was no light matter when he reflected

that he might be shut up for days in that narrow hole in the rock—an imprisonment which was bad enough to bear at the best. He knew how the feeling of thirst would grow upon him until it became a torture, and he began to perceive that the lack of food was not the only or the worst cause of starvation.

But he must bear it as well as he could, and the only way to bear it would be to think as little of it as possible. He ate sparingly of the salt meat, and began to think of what he should do to get rid of time, which was beginning to hang heavily on his hands.

He determined that he would go to the cavern end of the hole, to see what was going on, and possibly to catch a glimpse of Sophie Mallory. He thought he could do this safely, as he was quite sure that no other person would try the experiment that had proved fatal to Dave Soward.

There was a light in the cavern, as he could easily see through the chinks in the stones, though he could not tell whether it was caused by a lamp or a fire. Sophie was not to be seen, but there was a person alone in that portion of the rocky room who strangely attracted his attention.

This was an old man, to judge by his gray hair and beard and his pale and wrinkled face. His clothes were hardly better than a mass of rags; but he wore them with the air of one who had been accustomed to better apparel, and every now and then he drew himself up proudly as he walked the rocky floor, muttering and gesturing.

Featherweight could catch but a few words of his muttering, and to those few he could give no meaning. From the singular actions of the old man, and from the wild glare in his eyes, the lad judged that he was probably insane.

He was still walking the rocky floor, muttering and gesturing, when one of Ozark Alf's band came in, and spoke to him contemptuously.

"Come, old codger; git out o' this!"

"Whom are you addressing?" demanded the old man, turning upon him angrily. "If you speak to me in that style again, I will have you taken out and whipped. Do you know who I am, sir?"

"Nobody but an old fool."

"I am the King of the Mountain. I have but to speak, and my word is law."

"You ain't no king o' nothin'," stiffly replied the other.

The old man passed his hand across his brow, and changed his tone.

"I know who I am," he said, "and who you are. You are Bigfoot Pete, sometimes called Sleepy Pete, and I am poor old Martin Creswell, who has been robbed of his property and his child by rascals. But I will get it all back—everything back—and that very soon, and this den of thieves shall be broken up, and all of you shall suffer."

"That's all right, Uncle Martin," said the other. "But the fact is, old man, that I've been on guard since midnight, and am awful sleepy. I want to lie down here and take a snooze, and will be much obliged to you if you won't bother me."

The old man muttered a few words, and walked away to another part of the cavern. Bigfoot Pete threw down some blankets near the place where Featherweight was concealed, laid aside his rifle, his cartridge-box and his canteen, stretched himself out on the blankets, and in a few moments was snoring loudly.

The thoughts of the poor young fellow imprisoned in the hole were fixed upon that canteen. His thirst was troubling him greatly, and he thought he saw a means of satisfying it.

When the loud snores satisfied him of the condition of the sleeping man, he set himself at work to remove one of the stones that blocked up the cavern end of the hole. He accomplished this task quietly and with little difficulty, reached in his hand, and drew out the canteen. Then he replaced the stone as he found it.

"I hope it is not whisky!" he muttered, as he hugged the stolen treasure to his breast.

He removed the stopper, smelt of the contents, tasted, and knew that it was water. Then he would not have taken its weight in gold for the precious canteen.

CHAPTER VIII.

"HOORAY FOR OUR SIDE!"

FRANK MALLORY soon discovered that it was no easy matter to climb Jim Breen's lasso to the height he desired to reach; but he was not a heavy weight, and his arms were sinewy, and his will was strong. With the aid of the knotted

ropes he finally reached the summit of the rock, drew himself up to the stump, and paused to take breath.

After a while he crept forward, and passed out of sight of those below. Presently he returned, and his joyful countenance and eager signaling told them that he had made a discovery that pleased him.

He signaled for another man to follow him up the rope, and Herman Schweitopfel hastened to obey the signal. But the task was too much for the heavy German, and he had ascended but a few yards when he dropped back to the ground, puffing and perspiring.

"It vas no go, by shimminy!" he exclaimed. "I t'ought I vas go oop to find dot Feddervate; aber I might so vell vish dot I vas a eakle, by shimminy!"

A lighter and more active young man made the attempt, and soon succeeded in reaching Frank Mallory. Their rifles were then attached to the rope and drawn up, and, after a little more signaling by Mallory, the two men disappeared from view.

Believing that something of importance would soon be accomplished by this movement, Sheriff Jarvis drew up the rest of the men at the foot of the pass, ready for instant action when Frank Mallory's yell should give them the signal to charge.

Mallory and his partner found the summit of the rock which they had reached nearly flat, with only a few dwarf trees to break the level, and they crouched down and crawled a distance of some twenty yards to the other edge.

From this elevation they looked down on the plateau that formed the outwork of Ozark Alf's stronghold, and saw that it was occupied at that moment by only three men. One of them, rifle in hand, was stationed at the right, near the edge of what appeared to be a tremendous precipice. The other two, similarly armed, were loitering near the head of the pass. Although on guard, they evidently did not expect an attack or fear one, feeling confident of their ability, with the weapons in their hands, to hold that position against any force that would be likely to be brought against them.

But danger threatened them from a source that had not entered into their calculations.

Frank Mallory perceived that he could cover with his rifle one of the men at the head of the pass, and directed his partner to mark the guard at the right of the plateau.

Their rifles cracked together, and the man at whom Mallory had aimed fell like a log, as the bullet from above crashed through his brain. His comrades started back, and stared wildly about, wondering from what quarter the fatal stroke had come. The third man, badly hit, dropped his rifle, and ran toward a cleft in the rock at the rear of the plateau.

As soon as Mallory saw the effect of his shot, he gave voice with the full force of his lungs to an old army yell that had stirred stout hearts on many a hard-fought field, and Sheriff Jarvis, who was waiting for this signal, dashed at the head of his men up the steep and narrow ravine.

The one man who was left at the head of the pass retreated before this onset and several of the outlaws who had been drawn from the cavern by the shots and the yell, sought shelter in the cleft rock from the fire of their foes who poured up on the plateau.

Frank Mallory and his partner, perceiving that the movement had been as successful as they could wish, hastened to descend the rope and to join their friends at the head of the ravine.

The outworks of the fortress had been carried; but, as soon became evident to all, only one point in the campaign had been gained.

This was the conclusion at which Sheriff Jarvis arrived after making a careful survey of the situation.

"We are scarcely any better off than we were before," he said. "We have got over the curb, but the kettle is still at the bottom of the well. However, boys, it is consoling to feel that we know just where to find it."

"Provided that the bottom don't drop out of the well," suggested Frank Mallory.

Indeed, it was doubtful whether the position of the attacking party had been improved at all by this success. The outlaws were securely entrenched, and the narrow passage in the rock that led to their retreat was even easier to defend than the ravine had been, while their assailants were more dangerously exposed. A shot from that dark interior, by which one of the party was seriously wounded, showed them the necessity of taking cover and beginning another siege.

The rocky pile at the right of the plateau afforded sufficient protection in that quarter, and from this point they began to build such a breastwork of stones as should cover the entrance to the cavern.

Herman Schweitopfel, in spite of his weight and clumsiness, was one of the first to reach the plateau. He had hoped to find there something that would account for the disappearance of Featherweight. If the lad had been made a prisoner, the capture of the outlaws would rescue him; if he had been killed, his faithful friend was determined that he should be terribly avenged.

In this expectation poor Herman was sadly disappointed. Regardless of the occasional shots that were fired by the penned-up outlaws, he ran about the plateau looking in vain for his young friend. Then he passed around the pile of rocks at the right and ventured to look over the edge of that fearful cliff which Featherweight had so daringly climbed; but he neither saw nor heard anything of the lad who was so dear to him, though he called his name again and again.

There were tears in his voice, if not in his eyes, when he arose from his stooping position and cast a despairing glance around.

"Where is dot Feddervate?" he exclaimed. "Oh, mine boy, mine poor boy! Dose tyfels vas got you, oond your Herman vas nefer see you any more sometimes."

"Hooray for our side!" was the cry that came to him in a faint and muffled voice, as if proceeding from the rocks under his feet.

It was Featherweight who uttered the cry.

The possession of the sleeping outlaw's canteen of water was such a relief to him that he felt for a moment as if his troubles were all over, and he proceeded to make a hearty meal of his salt meat and bread, washing it down with the precious liquid.

Then it occurred to him that he did not know how long he might be shut up in that hole, and that it was necessary to use his store of provisions and water sparingly. So he put the rest away, and was frightened when he perceived that he had already half emptied the canteen.

He thought that he would return to the mouth of the hole and watch for a chance to escape, and he had started in that direction when a noise in the cavern attracted his attention.

This noise was caused by Bigfoot Pete, who had awakened and missed his canteen. He swore fearfully as he looked for it in vain, declaring that some infernal scoundrel, whose soul he devoted to the lower regions, had slipped in and stolen it while he was asleep.

As there was no one to listen to this outburst but the unseen spy, it grew hotter and louder, until it was interrupted by the hasty entrance of Ozark Alf.

"Come out of this, Pete!" cried the outlaw chief. "There's the devil to pay in the pass, and you're wanted."

"What's up?" asked Bigfoot Pete.

"We are attacked."

"Who by?"

"That's more than I can tell you yet."

"I'll bet a hoss that it's about that gal. She will be the ruination of us yet."

"Don't talk like a fool," replied Ozark Alf. "You are to be well paid for your share in the job, and what more do you care for?"

"I'd like to know what's goin' to pay a man fur bein' all bu'sted up in business, and p'raps gittin' his chunk put out."

"That is nonsense, Pete. If there was an army of them, they couldn't get at us in a month of Sundays. Come along."

"Wait a minute, Cap. Some onaccountable hellion has stole my canteen."

"Bah! You have mislaid it. Come out, I say!"

The man followed his chief out of the cavern, grumbling as he went, and Featherweight reflected upon the exciting news. He had not heard any of the shots that were fired outside; but it was plain that his friends and Sophie Mallory's friends had sought the outlaws in their den, with the intention of routing them out and rescuing the young lady. Although this was cheering news to the prisoner, it was disheartening to learn from Ozark Alf that the stronghold could not be captured in "a month of Sundays." Featherweight was sure that less than one week would settle his case, and that he would either be dead or a prisoner.

He crawled back to the mouth of the hole, and listened. He heard an occasional shot, but nothing to indicate that his friends were making any progress.

He was forced to pass another night in his dark and narrow prison, and the next day time

passed more slowly and more disagreeably than ever, until the afternoon was well advanced. Then he heard a swift succession of shots, followed by cries of rage and triumph, that convinced him that some important advantage had been gained by one side or the other. He lay close to the mouth of the hole, and soon he heard a voice on the plateau, calling his name.

He recognized the well known accents of Herman Schweitpfel, and tried to answer him, but was so overcome by excitement at the moment that he could not speak.

As soon as he regained his voice, he thrust his head out of the hole, and shouted with a will:

"Hooray for our side!"

CHAPTER IX.

INSIDE THE STRONGHOLD.

OZARK ALF'S discovery, which he believed he had made, of the fact that an unknown spy, who could not be seen or reached, was concealed within the limits of his stronghold, gave him much uneasiness. The death of one of the best members of his band, in an attempt to unearth the spy, put him in a very bad humor.

He reported the discovery to Alfred Creswell, who was much surprised and annoyed. The affair was so unaccountable and mysterious that they did not know what to think of it. It seemed to be impossible, the young chieftain said, for any human being to climb the cliff, and there was surely no other way to reach that hole in the rock.

"I know of only one person," remarked the man from Memphis, "whom I would bet on as being able to do it."

"Who is that?" asked his son.

"The young fellow I spoke to you about, who went back on me in Cairo. His name is Fred Light, I believe; but he is generally known as Featherweight. As he took up with Mallory and Sophie, it is likely that he is in this neighborhood."

"Whoever he is, dad, we have got him fast. I would not ask another man to go in there and get killed; but we are sure to starve him out."

"If it really is that young fellow, Alf, I know what the girl meant when she told us that she knew of our plan for catching her. The boy has been up here before, and has overheard us, and has reported to Sophie and Mallory."

"That don't seem to be possible, though it may be so. Let us go and tell her that we have caught him, and see how she takes it."

Sophie was bearing her captivity as patiently as she could. She had been given an apartment, if a separate portion of the cavern may be so called, to herself, and was comfortably lodged, although deprived of light and fresh air. The knowledge that Featherweight was near her, and the encouraging words he had spoken to her had cheered her considerably, and had caused her to hope that she might be rescued; but the time of her release might not be near at hand, and she settled herself to endure her imprisonment, hoping that no worse fate was in store for her.

When Ozark Alf and the man from Memphis appeared in her presence, she received them calmly and coldly, and her cousin hastened to astonish her.

"I have a bit of news for you, Sophie," he said. "We have caught your young friend."

"My young friend?" she asked, and her face turned pale as she thought at once of Featherweight, whose words had been in her mind when they entered.

"Your young friend who told you that your uncle and I were going to take you away from that man Mallory. He was foolish enough to venture back here, and now we have got him."

"What have you done with him?" she eagerly asked, forgetting all other considerations for the moment in her anxiety concerning the fate of the brave lad who had so signally befriended her.

The meaning glances that passed between her uncle and her cousin showed that they had been dumping her and she wished that she had not spoken without stopping to think.

"I haven't done anything with him yet," replied Ozark Alf; "but he is shut up in a hole in the rock here, where he can't get out, and he will have to give himself up or starve to death."

Perceiving that she had given her scheming relatives exactly the information they wanted, Sophie thought it best to say no more, and took refuge in silence.

The arrival of Sheriff Jarvis and his party caused an excitement in the cavern, but no serious uneasiness, as Ozark Alf was sure that his fortress would hold out against any assault, and he did not fear a siege. After placing men

to guard the pass, he returned to the cavern, and joined his father in an unsuccessful endeavor to induce Sophie to assent to the terms they proposed.

Late in the afternoon a stone with a paper wrapped around it was thrown up the pass to the plateau, and the paper was carried to Ozark Alf. It contained this writing:

"Send down Frank Mallory's wife, and we will let you alone. I have men enough to capture your whole gang if I want to, and you will have a hard time if you refuse our terms."

"SHERIFF JARVIS."

The young chief of the outlaws immediately wrote a few words on the back of the paper, wrapped it around the stone and threw it down the pass.

This was the message he sent back:

"You had better keep away from here, or you will get hurt. You can't take this position in a solid year."

OZARK ALF."

The news of the attack on the stronghold was carefully kept from Sophie Mallory, lest her hopes should be raised and her obstinacy increased: but it could not be so easily concealed from the other prisoner, who had been for so long a time an inmate of the cavern, and who was allowed to range at his will, within certain limits, which of late he had not attempted to pass.

Old Martin Creswell noticed the excitement that prevailed in the cavern, and knew that something of importance had occurred. He watched, and listened, and asked questions, and soon learned that the stronghold of the outlaws was in a state of siege.

This discovery put him in high glee, and when he met Ozark Alf, he taunted the young chief, and predicted his capture and the destruction of his band.

"Didn't I tell you so?" he exclaimed. "Often I have said to you that the time would come, and would soon come, when this den of thieves shall be broken up, and I shall have my own again. That time is coming now. It has already come."

"Don't bother me with such jabber, uncle Martin," replied the young man. "You are crazy, and don't know what you are talking about. That party stands no better chance to get in here than you do to get out, and you know what that chance is worth."

When Sheriff Jarvis and his men had carried the pass, and had gained possession of the plateau, the old man again exulted over Ozark Alf, and predicted the speedy capture or death of himself and his band.

"Go and take a rest, old man, and put your head in soak," said the chief. "It is true that those folks are closer to us than they were, but they are not a bit nearer to getting at us, and then never will be."

At night Martin Creswell found himself alone in what may be called the main hall of the cavern, all the outlaws being on guard or asleep. He sat with his back against the rocky wall, and his head dropped upon his breast, as thoughts of his great losses, his long imprisonment, and his possible release, filled his troubled brain.

A low whistle at his side startled him, and he stared about in amazement.

The whistle was followed by a voice, that seemed to come from the rocks near his feet.

"Uncle Martin! Uncle Martin!"

"Who speaks?" he eagerly asked, trying in vain to locate the voice.

"Hush! Not so loud! I am your friend, and belong to the party outside here."

"The party that is going to break up this den of thieves, and give me my own again?"

"That's the game we are tryin' to play, Uncle Martin."

"Where are you?" asked the old man.

"Down here in a hole in the rock. See where I move this stone."

A piece of rock was moved from its place, and a brown hand was thrust through the opening.

"Can't I get in there?" asked Martin Creswell. "Can't I leave this place by that way?"

"No," replied Featherweight, whose voice it was that came from the hole. "That stone is the only part of the rock that ain't solid. I have tried to make the hole bigger, but it won't work, and I can't much more than get my hand through it. You can do much more good in there, mister, than you can outside."

"What do you mean?"

"I say, old gentleman, are you really crazy, or just puttin' on?"

"I am not crazy," replied the old man. "I have been wronged so deeply, and have been shut up here so long, that my head is not as clear as it has been; but it is strong and cool."

"If your head is level enough to stand it, I have got a big piece of news for you."

"I can bear good news, I am sure."

"It is about your daughter," said the lad.

"My daughter! Is she alive?"

"She is alive, but believes that you are dead. She is married to a young man of this neighborhood, a fine fellow named Frank Mallory."

"I pray God that I may soon get clear of this den, so that I may hasten to go to my daughter."

"You wouldn't have to go far, old gentleman," said Featherweight. "Ozark Alf and his father have stole her away from her home, and shut her up in that cavern."

"My daughter here, and a prisoner! I will go and find her at once."

"Be quiet, and go easy. You promised to keep your head level and cool, and you mustn't forget that, or you will do more harm than good."

"What shall I do, then?" asked the old man.

"Just keep your mouth shut and your eyes and ears open, and wait and watch for chances. Will you promise to do that?"

"I do promise, as I hope for liberty."

"Good-night, then."

Shortly after this interview Ozark Alf was surprised at receiving an application from Martin Creswell for a gun, or a pistol, or a weapon of some sort.

"What do you want with such a tool?" asked the young chief.

"I want to help to defend this fortress," replied the prisoner.

"What! you? I am afraid, old man, that you would be more likely to take the other side."

"Why should I? You have treated me cruelly, but blood is thicker than water. You are my relation, and I want a chance to fight for you."

Alf could not be induced to see the matter in that light, and refused the old man's request.

But he soon missed one of his pistols, and looked for it in vain, and vainly searched Martin Creswell, who denied all knowledge of the lost weapon.

The young leader of the outlaws had other causes of uneasiness besides the loss of his pistol, and the greatest of these was a doubt of his ability to hold his castle against such a siege as had been begun, and a fear that he might run short of provisions.

He was careful to conceal this doubt from his comrades, but communicated it to his father, whose anxiety was greater than his own.

"Suppose that those people should be on the point of getting in here," said the man from Memphis, "or that we should find ourselves in danger of being starved out, what could we do? Is there no other way to get out but this? Is there no back door to the den?"

"Yes, there is another way out," replied Ozark Alf. "It is a hard road to travel, but we can get off by that way, if the worst comes to the worst. We would have to tie the girl to a rope, and let her down over a steep bit of rock, and I don't know whether she could stand that."

"She would have to stand it, Alf."

CHAPTER X.

FEATHERWEIGHT AND THE PANTHERS.

HERMAN SCHWEITPFEL was overcome with joy when he heard the welcome voice of Featherweight, and saw his young friend thrust out his head from the hole in the cliff.

He helped the lad up on the plateau, and triumphantly led him to the headquarters of the besieging party, which was located behind a pile of rock. There Featherweight was heartily welcomed by Frank Mallory and Sheriff Jarvis, who were anxious to hear what he had to tell.

"Just give me a chance for my life first," he said. "I am as hungry as a bear, and more thirsty than hungry. The sooner you fill me up, the sooner I will tell you what you want to know."

His friends hastened to supply his needs, and while he was eating and drinking he related his adventures and imprisonment in the hole in the rock.

"I reckon you won't want to stick your head in that hole again, my boy," suggested Sheriff Jarvis.

"But I will, though," replied Featherweight. "If I am sure that you folks will keep this end of the hole open, so that I can get out when I want to, I won't hate it as I did when I was shut up. There's more'n one thing to be looked after in this business, I can tell you. The fuss

is all about property, just as I said it was, Mr. Mallory. It seems that Miss Sophie ought to have a good bit of property of her own; but that man from Memphis has got it, and wants to keep it. There is another party mixed up in the tangle, who is a prisoner in there with her, and I reckon that he has been kept there a long time. Who do you think he is, now?"

"You are too much for me this time, Fred," said Mallory. "I was never good at conundrums."

"Supposin' you guess. It's a man."

"I give it up."

"A near relative of Miss Sophie."

"She has no brother. It can't be possible that her father is alive and in there."

"That's the party," said Featherweight. "He is an old man, to judge by his looks, and his name is Martin Creswell."

"Does he know that Sophie has been captured?" asked Mallory.

"Reckon he don't. I doubt if Ozark Alf and the old rascal would be likely to tell him that. But he will know it to-night, if I can get a chance to talk to him."

"Do you think that will be safe, Fred?" asked Sheriff Jarvis.

"Don't see why it shouldn't. The folks in the cave want to make out that he is crazy; but I've a notion that he is tol'able level-headed. If he is, he can be useful to us in there, in more ways than one."

"A sort of a fire in the rear, hey?"

"Somethin' in that line. I mean to crawl in the hole to-night and watch for a chance to talk to him."

Featherweight did go into the hole that night and was quite jubilant when he came out and reported the success of his enterprise.

"The old man is right enough," he said, "and I believe he will keep his mouth shut and his eyes open, as I told him to. So he can let us know what is goin' on in there, and maybe he can help us when we get ready to make a dash."

"Is there no danger, Fred," asked Sheriff Jarvis, "that Ozark Alf may find you out and get hold of you?"

"Not a bit of it, while this end of the hole is clear, and at the other end I can't get in, and they can't get out. I am like the mouse in a holler log—I can see everybody, and nobody can see me. And that reminds me that there is one thing I haven't told you about. There's a back way to the cave, and those chaps can get out when they want to."

"I can't believe it," said the sheriff. "Some of our men went around on that side of the mountain, and they looked as closely and carefully as men can look, but could find nothing of that sort."

"But there is," insisted Featherweight. "I heard Ozark Alf and that old wretch from Memphis talkin' about it. The young chap said it was a hard road to travel, but allowed that they could get out that way in a pinch. Now, Mr. Jarvis, I would like to know, if you please, how you expect to get at them from this side."

"Well, my boy, we can only do what we are doing now. You saw in the daylight that we have built a piece of stone wall out from this pile of rock—a sort of breastwork, as I may say, covering the entrance to the cavern. We can lie behind that, you know, and gradually move it nearer to the hole, until we get them bottled up tolerable tight. That's the only chance we have, as far as I can see."

"And that's a mighty slow game," said the lad. "I mean to start out in the mornin' and hunt that back way, and it will be queer if I don't find it. Just now I am goin' to get some sleep."

Early in the morning Featherweight was astir and ready to start. Herman Schweitopfel was also on hand.

"I goes mit you, Feddervate," said the German.

"All right, Herman. I will be glad to have you along. You will watch me, and see that I don't get into a scrape."

"I will see dot nobody puts you mit a hole in, mine boy, by shimminy! You gets in no more von dose tight blaces ven Herman goes mit you."

"By thunder! Herman, I forgot about my horse. I left him tied down yonder at the foot of the cliff, and the poor feller must be starved to death by this time, if he hasn't broke loose."

"Dot hoss vas alles recht," said Herman.

"Ven I vent by dot walley, to look me about for mine Feddervate, I finds dot hoss dere, oond brings him oop, oond now he feeds mit dose udder hosses, by dot camp."

"How thoughtful you are, Herman! You

are a perfect brick, smoothed and varnished. Now we are ready to light out."

The journey was a long one, and the two friends, who were not as well acquainted with that region as the scouts who had previously made the search, lost their way more than once, and became entangled in ravines and thickets, so that the day was nearly spent when they reached a position which they judged to be in the rear of the outlaws' stronghold.

Even when they had gained this position, they found themselves far below the point at which they were aiming, which seemed to be almost inaccessible by reason of a succession of ridges and precipices, intersected by difficult ravines.

Featherweight shook his head as he looked up at the rugged heights, and realized the extent of the task he had undertaken.

"It is no wonder, Herman," he said, "that those men gave it up as a bad job, and said that a back door to that den couldn't be found."

"An eakle might find him dot back door," remarked Herman, "aber dese legs vas nefer made for climbin' dese mountains ofer."

"But my legs were made for just that sort of a job, Herman. If I knew what point to strike for, you may bet your yager that I would reach it. But it is too late to go into the climbing business to-day, and we had better find a good place to camp, and tie our horses for the night."

They found a suitable place under the trees, near a brook, where there were some patches of grass. There they unsaddled their horses, and gave them a chance to graze.

"Before it gets dark," announced Featherweight, "I reckon we may as well scout around here a little. We have got to put in our time somehow, and we might strike a trail or something."

They had not gone far from their camp when they did come across a trail. It was a small one, and little used, but could easily be distinguished, and it apparently led direct to the lights.

"It is a horse trail," decided the lad, as he knelt down and examined it closely. "Anyhow, I am sure that horses have gone over it, and you and I can go, Herman, where horses have gone."

"Dot vas so," replied Herman. "I will climb yoost so much like anybody's hoss."

"Now, Herman, I want to go down this trail a little way, to see where it leads to, and I wish you would stay right here until I get back, to mark the place where we struck the trail when we came from the camp."

Herman grumbled at this request, but finally yielded.

"Now, you Feddervate," he said, "don't you go auf to get yourself mit dose schrapes in, vond keep yourself von dose holes ouet, or you makes troubles mit me."

"All right, Herman. I will mind my eyes, and bring myself back safe and sound. See if I don't."

Featherweight followed the trail over a wooded slope, and down a long ravine, for half a mile or so, but saw no change in its character or its general direction. Unwilling to turn back without learning something more, he followed it further, until he came to a little lake among the hills, around the edge of which the trail seemed to lead.

As it was clearly useless to continue that search any longer, and as he knew that Herman must be getting uneasy, he had made up his mind to return, when his attention was attracted by some kittenish noises, and he saw two brown animals, considerably larger than kittens, rolling and tumbling about as they played on the wild grass near the lake.

He had never before seen anything of the kind, but guessed at once that they were cub panthers, and was instantly seized by a boyish desire to capture and carry away one of the wild young things. It would be such a surprise to Herman, and something so fine to show to Mallory and his other friends.

He had no difficulty in catching one of the cubs, though it cried and scratched, and he was obliged to drop his rifle until he could tie its paws with his handkerchief.

But the cry of the cub had reached the sharp ears of its mother, and a wild, unearthly scream warned Featherweight of his danger.

The she panther was close at hand when she screeched, and directly she came bounding toward the lad, her eyes blazing with anger.

Featherweight at once dropped the struggling cub, picked up his rifle, and fired with a hurried aim at the beast as she crouched for a spring.

The shot struck her in the breast, and shortened her spring without preventing it. She struck the ground near the lad's feet, and howled and tore up the ground in her agony as she strove to get at him. He was glad to get out of her way until he reloaded his rifle and sent a bullet through her brain.

He was still trembling with the excitement of this encounter, when another yell, also close at hand, pierced his ears, and this was followed by yet another from a little distance.

Then other screams, further away, but hardly less frightful because of the distance, broke upon the dusky air, until the mountains seemed to be alive with panthers.

Featherweight knew that the mate of the panther he had killed was hurrying to her rescue, and that his yells had aroused others of his tribe who were hot for combat.

The lad did not lose his presence of mind, but grew cooler and calmer as the danger increased and came closer to him. His rifle was empty, and he knew that it would be useless to attempt to escape by flight; but something must be done immediately to save his scalp.

In this emergency he fortunately remembered hearing an old hunter say that a panther cannot be induced to enter the water, and there was the lake!

Slinging his cartridge box over his shoulder and holding up his rifle, he dashed into the water, and waded until it was breast deep around him, turning just in time to face the panther's mate as he came bounding out of the timber.

As the beast stopped at the shore, lashing his tail in anger and screaming savagely, Featherweight knew that he had been told the truth, and that he was as safe in the water as if he had been surrounded by a stone wall.

Accordingly he inserted a cartridge in his rifle at leisure, took a careful aim, and fired, his bullet striking the beast near the fore-leg and knocking him over at once. With a yell of pain he crawled away and laid down by the carcass of his mate.

Before the lad could reload, a third panther appeared upon the scene, and soon a fourth was added to the number of his enemies; but their presence neither frightened nor annoyed him, as he had plenty of cartridges, and knew that he was in a safe position.

A few well-directed shots left him master of the field, and then he waded ashore and made sure that the beasts could do no further harm.

As darkness was rapidly coming on, he hastened to return to his friend, thankful that he had escaped so great a peril. He no longer thought of carrying away one of the cubs, but left them whining and smelling about the body of their dead mother.

CHAPTER XI.

FINDING THE BACK DOOR.

WHEN Featherweight reached the spot where he had left Herman Schweitopfel, he found his friend in a state of great anxiety and excitement, which was scarcely lessened by the safe arrival of the lad.

"Where vas you been all dese times, Feddervate?" was his anxious inquiry. "Mine Gott in Himmel! you vas make yourself all vet ofer. Vas you tumbelt some rifer in down dere? How you gets all dose schrapes, hey? Oh, mine boy! mine boy! you vas put yourself some more von dose schrapes in, oond I leaf you go all alone mit yourself."

"It's all right, Herman," assured Fred. "I have been in a gay old scrape, bet your life—just about the liveliest racket I ever struck. But I came out as sound as a dollar and at the top of the market."

The lad proceeded to relate his adventure with the panthers, which caused his friend to open his eyes to their widest extent, and to splutter out a variety of solid German ejaculations.

"Dot vas a lively ragget, by shimminy!" exclaimed Herman. "I vas nefer hear anytings like dot before already. Four panthers comes at you oond you kills dem all! If it vas anybody but yourself, mine boy, vot tells me dot, it would be a lie so big like a mountain. Oond so dose panthers don't like vasser, hey? Vell, I don't know as I blames dem for dot. I vonder, now, if dey would drink beer? Oh, Feddervate! I nefer leafs you to go off alone some more."

"It wasn't my fault, Herman. I never tried to pick a fight with the panthers."

"I yoost vonder, Feddervate, vy you didn't pick you some odder cub up and bring some more panthers on."

"Never mind, old boy. We will go out to-

gether in the morning, and you shall take care of both of us. Just now we had better get back to camp and lay in some grub and go to sleep."

Early the next morning the two friends broke camp, leaving their horses picketed where they could graze, and took up the trail that led to the heights. Although steep and rugged, it was not a very difficult path to follow, and occasionally they could distinguish horse tracks, which led them to believe that it had been used by the outlaws in reaching their den.

But the hot sun and the rough climbing told heavily upon poor Herman, who panted and perspired as he toiled up the rocky way, and he was obliged to stop and rest now and then, while he envied the ease with which his young friend mounted the heights.

Slow traveling and frequent halts lengthened out the morning, making the journey more tedious than Featherweight had expected to find it, and it was noon when they reached a ledge, near the summit of the mountain, where their further progress was stopped by a high and overhanging cliff.

This precipitous mass of rock ran along the ledge as far as it reached, and on the face of the cliff nature had written in the plainest language "No Thoroughfare."

The scouts examined the ledge closely, but found no sort of an opening or passage to the top, and it was clear that the trail which they had been following ended near the foot of the cliff, at a spot where Featherweight, after a careful search, discovered the last of the horse tracks.

"Dose hosses vas nefer climb so mooch higher dan dis," averred Herman. "Ve shtops vere dose hosses shtops, oond now ve vas played ouet, mine boy."

"I don't feel like giving it up so," declared Fred, "not by a long shot. But this thing is mortal queer, and it beats my time. It is easy enough to see that the trail ends here, and that the horses stopped here; but why was the trail ever made, and why were the horses brought here, just to run up against this rock and go no further?"

"Dot vas a gone-under-um, Feddervate, oond I gifs it up."

"Nobody is likely to take such a trip for nothing," resumed the lad. "Nobody would make the tramp up here and bring a horse just to get a sight of the view, though it's a mortal fine one, by thunder! There must be some way to get to the top of that cliff."

"Aber you don't see dot vay, mine boy."

"But there is a way. Yes, I've got it now, sure pop!"

"Vot vas you shtruck mit yourself, den?"

"Why, Herman, I heard Ozark Alf say that the back way out of the den was a hard road to travel, and that they would have to lower Miss Sophie down with a rope."

"Mine Gott in himmel! She could nefer shtand dot!"

"She would have to stand it, as that old hog from Memphis said. Don't you see, Herman? They have brought loaded horses up here, and have pulled the load up to the top with a rope, and then the horses have been taken back. The game is plain enough now."

Featherweight walked along the foot of the cliff, carefully examining its rugged face, and shook his head sadly as he perceived how the mass of rock overhung him.

"I wonder if I could climb that cliff," he said musingly.

Herman expressed the opinion that he might as well try to climb the under side of a rainbow.

"It does look that way," replied Fred; "but it is just wonderful, Herman, how much easier than they look some things get to be, when you go right ahead and take hold of them."

"Aber dere vas nottings on dot rock vot you takes holdt mit," suggested Herman.

"It would be a rough job, and that's a fact, and I wouldn't like to tackle it and contract to go through. But I am ready to bet that I could climb up tol'able high."

"Oh, Feddervate! Feddervate! Look oop! Look oop! By shimminy! vot vas dot, anyhow?"

When the lad stepped forward and looked up toward the summit of the cliff, he was not surprised at his friend's excitement. "Dot" was evidently a woman, seated upon a piece of plank fastened to a rope that was being let down from above, and she herself seemed to be securely tied to the rope. This much could easily be seen, but those who held the rope were not at the moment visible.

Featherweight's keen sight and quick judgment took in the situation at once.

"Run in under the cliff, Herman!" he said. "Be quick about it! They haven't seen us, and they mustn't. This is the back door of the den, old boy, and it is Miss Sophie that they are letting down with that rope."

"Mine gracious! Vas efer anyt'ings like dot?" exclaimed Herman, as he hastily obeyed this direction.

"We have struck the right place, Herman, and have struck it just at the right time. You must hide here, and watch her until she reaches the ledge. Then cut her loose as quick as you can, and bring her in under the rock."

"Vot vill you be doin' mit yourself, den, right away?" demanded the Teuton.

"I am goin' to climb up here and block the rest of the game."

"You gets yourself some more shrapes in, Feddervate. You shuts yourself up mit some odder holes in."

"Have your knife ready, Herman, and attend to business, and never mind me."

The German eagerly watched the descending piece of plank and its burden, which was being slowly lowered from the summit of the cliff to the ledge. The seated woman was motionless, and it was evident that her arms were so securely bound to the rope that she could not move them. As she approached the ledge, Herman recognized the features of Sophie Mallory, and stood ready with his knife to free her.

As she reached the ledge she was pale and trembling; but her eyes opened, and her face flushed brightly, when Herman darted forward to assist her. She knew him at once, and her exclamations of surprise and joy quickened him to his work.

He hastened to draw her in, as she was, under the shadow of the cliff, and rapidly plied his knife in cutting the bonds that secured her to the seat and the rope.

In a few minutes she was free, and he assisted her to arise, and helped her to a seat on a flat rock, as she was so exhausted that she was unable to stand.

"Sit you yoost here, miss," said Herman, "oond be so easy like you can, vile I goes oond looks me about a leedle."

He stepped out from the shadow of the cliff, and looked up toward the summit. The first thing he saw was a man sliding down the rope. Apparently the outlaws had not been willing to trust it with a double weight, and had sent this man down as soon as Sophie Mallory had reached the ledge.

But this was not all that Herman saw.

Fred Light, in his close examination of the face of the cliff, had observed a series of rugged points of rock, which he believed would give him a hold for his hands and feet, and these led to a break in the rocky wall which might afford a pathway further on and up.

As soon as he saw the rope and the burden that was being lowered, a plan of action was formed in his mind. After giving Herman his hasty directions, he ran to the spot he had noticed, and began the ascent of the shelving face of the cliff.

The task was a difficult and dangerous one; but, by exerting all his strength and activity, he reached the break in the rock, where his progress was much easier and safer until he had passed the curve and reached a point where the cliff was nearly perpendicular.

Here he found himself almost half-way to the summit, and within easy reach of the rope.

Looking up, he saw a man descending, and he at once grasped the rope with one hand, and cut it with his sharp knife, letting the severed portion drop upon the ledge.

The man above him looked down, and, seeing the mischief that had been done, uttered a yell. Featherweight immediately crept down under the curve, just in time to escape a pistol-shot from the summit.

He found the descent even more difficult than the ascent had been; but he was then sheltered from the fire of the outlaws, even if they had not been too busily engaged in pulling up their comrade to pay attention to him.

CHAPTER XII.

SAFE AT LAST.

"DOT Feddervate is der tyfel!" exclaimed Herman, when he perceived how his young friend proposed to block the game of the men at the top of the cliff.

The cut rope fell nearly at his feet, and he stared upward in amazement as he saw the predicament of the outlaw who had been coming down in such a lively fashion.

A bullet from above, that whizzed by his head, startled him out of his attitude of admiration, and compelled him to take shelter under

the cliff, where he pointed out Featherweight to Sophie Mallory, and both watched, in silent and almost breathless interest, his descent of the shelving rock.

The lad safely reached the ledge, and was warmly greeted by Sophie, who hugged him in the excess of her joy.

"You dear, good, brave fellow!" she exclaimed. "How glad I am that you are safe, and how thankful that you have saved me! How shall I ever prove my gratitude for all you have done for me?"

"You don't have to do anythin' of the kind, Miss Sophie. It is nothin' but fun to me, you know."

"How did you happen to be here, Fred, just in the nick of time? I do not understand it a bit. Please tell me all about it."

"I can't do that just now. Wait till we can feel safe. If we are strong enough to travel, we must get away from here as fast as we can."

"Dot vas so," remarked Herman, "oond ve must look pooty sharp ouet or dose peoples vill shoot us de heads off."

This was indeed a serious danger, which had to be carefully avoided. Featherweight led his companions along the ledge, keeping them well under the cover of the cliff, until they reached a place where there was a sharp descent, and down this they ran, one at a time, to fresh cover. Half a dozen shots were fired at them from the top of the cliff as they made this break; but they were pretty well out of the reach of their enemies, and were unharmed by the flying bullets.

Then they regained the trail, and Herman and Fred assisted Sophie Mallory down the rugged path until they reached their camp, when she was mounted on Featherweight's horse, and they started to return to their friends. It was then near the close of day, but it was thought best to get as far on the route as they could, although they did not believe that pursuit would be possible.

When Sophie pressed for an explanation of their arrival at the foot of the cliff just as they were needed, Fred Light told her of what he had heard Ozark Alf say concerning the back door of the cavern, and how he and Herman had gone to search for that back door.

"It was only by good luck that we happened to get there just as they were letting you down," he said.

"It was more than lucky," she replied, "and I thank the Lord who sent you there in time to save me. My uncle and cousin must have made up their minds soon after you heard them talking about running me off. They came to me this morning, and told me that I must go on a journey. I asked them what they were going to do with me, and they said that they meant to take me to Memphis. I begged them to let me remain where I was, as I would at least be nearer to Frank, and uncle Alfred told me that I might stay if I would sign a paper that he had written. I refused to do so, and they took me out on the rocks, after making me pass through a hole where I had to crawl on my hands and knees."

"Three other men went with them, and they carried a long rope, and took me to the edge of that fearful place. There they said that I would have to be tied and let down over the rocks alone. I told them that the fright would kill me, if nothing else, and begged them not to treat me so cruelly. They offered me another chance to sign the paper, and promised me that if I would do so I should have no further trouble; but I refused to obey them. I do not know whether I would really have lost anything by signing it; but I was determined not to gratify them if it cost me my life."

"Bully girl!" exclaimed Fred Light. "I beg your pardon, Miss Sophie. I meant to say that you were real plucky, and I am ever so proud of you."

"Perhaps I might have signed it, Fred, if it had not been for what you said to me when I was in that cavern. When they tied me to a piece of plank and the long rope, I shut my eyes and gave up, as I fully expected to die. I did not faint, for a wonder, but was more dead than alive when at last I touched the rock below. Then I opened my eyes and saw what I never expected to see again—a friend!"

"Dot vas me," said Herman, with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Do you know whether those chaps had another rope, Miss Sophie?" asked Featherweight.

"They brought only that one from the cavern," she replied.

"It ain't likely that they had another, though maybe they might make one by tyin' a lot of

halters or picket-ropes together. But their game has been blocked for a while, anyhow, and I don't believe there is any danger of their gettin' after us to-night. So we had better hunt a place in the brush and go into camp."

Early the next morning they set out again, and reached Sheriff Jarvis's camp at the foot of the pass before the sun was three hours high.

Featherweight left Sophie at the camp with Herman and went up on the plateau to find Frank Mallory and the sheriff.

They were overjoyed at seeing him, and congratulated him upon his safe return, saying that they feared that he and his friend had got lost in the mountains, or had possibly gotten into the hands of the outlaws.

"Not that, anyhow," replied the lad. "You may just bet your last dollar that they would never take us alive, unless they came on us when we were asleep. We did lose our way more than once, but found it as often as we lost it, and I did get into a pretty tight pinch of a scrape; but here we are, safe and sound, and we ain't a bit ashamed of our work, either."

"What was your work, my boy?" asked the sheriff. "Did you do any better than the men I sent around there?"

"Well, Cap, I shouldn't wonder if our eyes were a little sharper than theirs."

"Do you mean to say that you have found the back door that Ozark Alf spoke about?"

"That is just the very thing that we have found, Cap. It is a hard road to travel, as the chap said, and I wouldn't bet a cent on your gettin' into the cave by that trail."

"Then your discovery is of no use to us, after all."

"Well, I reckon you will think it is of some use when you come to look into it a little. We have brought a party back with us who has traveled over the road."

"Why, then, do you say that we cannot pass there?" impatiently asked Frank Mallory. "We can go where any man has gone."

"This party only traveled it one way, and wouldn't like to make the trip again."

"You are talking very strangely, Fred Light, and for one I confess that I do not understand your meaning. Where is the party of whom you speak?"

"Down yonder at the camp."

"Come, Captain Jarvis, let us go and see him."

"Come on, then," said Featherweight, "and I will interjuce you."

The "party" to whom he referred, as may be surmised, was Sophie Mallory, and his purpose had been to prepare a joyful surprise for her husband. Sheriff Jarvis was as much astonished and delighted as Frank himself, and praised Fred highly for his intelligence and skill and pluck, though the lad declared that it was only his good fortune that had brought him to the right place at the right time.

"I say, Fred," whispered Mallory, when the excitement of meeting Sophie had partly subsided, "did you tell her about the other party—the old man, you know?"

"I didn't dare to," replied Featherweight. "She was so badly upset, that I was afraid it might worry her too much."

"But she must know it."

"Yes, I reckon she ought to."

"What are you two whispering about?" asked Sophie.

"The fact is, my dear," said Mallory, "that we have some important news for you—news of your father."

"Why, Frank, my father has been dead these many years."

"There may be some mistake about that, Sophie. I think there is. Our young friend here tells me that he has seen your father lately, and has talked with him."

"Seen and talked with my father? Is it possible that he is alive? Why, then, is he not here?"

"Cause he can't get here," briefly replied Featherweight.

"Where is he?"

"In the cavern up yonder, where those two devils, your uncle and your cousin, have kept him a prisoner for ever so long."

"May the Lord avenge him! It is a wonder if it has not driven him crazy."

"Those scamps want to make out that he is crazy," said Fred; "but I reckon they know better. He says that his head is level enough, and I think it is."

The lad then related to Sophie so much of his adventures in the hole in the rock as covered the first appearance of Martin Creswell and his subsequent interview with the old man. Between joy and grief she hardly knew whether

to laugh or cry, and did both by turns. But she closed the performance by giving Featherweight a succession of sisterly hugs.

"What a blessing you have been to me!" she said. "You have saved me from all my perils, and if my father is ever rescued from that den of thieves, it is you I have to thank for it. But what are you going to do, my friends?" she asked, turning to Sheriff Jarvis and her husband. "I am safe, but my poor father is a prisoner, and what will become of him?"

"You know, Sophie, that I will do my best to serve you and rescue him," said Frank Mallory, "and I am sure that we can depend upon our good friends here."

"For my part, Mrs. Mallory," said Captain Jarvis, "I mean to see this thing through, not only for your sake and your husband's, but because I am hot for the scalps of those cursed thieves. They have troubled this country long enough, and it is time they were cleared out."

CHAPTER XIII.

DISARMING THE ENEMY.

LEAVING Frank Mallory with his rescued wife, Featherweight and Herman Schweitopfel accompanied Captain Jarvis up on the plateau, to observe the siege of the outlaws' fortress.

They perceived that progress had been made during their absence, and that it seemed to be sure, although it was undoubtedly slow.

Starting from the rocky mass on the plateau that has frequently been mentioned, they had thrown up a breastwork of broken rock, covering the entrance to the cavern, and long and high enough to protect several men.

A portion of the force behind this breastwork acted as sharpshooters, and did their work so effectively that not one of the outlaws dared to expose any portion of his person. The others were employed in bringing the breastwork nearer to the cliff, by moving forward the stones of which it was composed.

This operation had proceeded so far that when Featherweight returned from his successful expedition he found the stone advanced to the cavern entrance, where it stood like a two-sided pyramid, completely blocking up the pass, and shutting Ozark Alf and his men within their fortress.

"You have got the hole stopped up tol'able well, Cap," said the lad. "Those chaps are near about bottled up, as a body may say. But you ain't in there yet, and I don't rightly know how you expect to get in."

"I see nothing more that we can do," replied Sheriff Jarvis, "except to keep moving that pile of rock forward, and so close in on them."

"Aber ven you drifes in dot cork so tight like nefer vas," suggested Herman, "you goes not in mit dot cork. You stays by de outside."

"True enough, my friend; but as we can't get in, we must at least try to prevent those rascals from getting out, and I think we have done that job pretty well."

Just at this instant a fierce yell and a rattling volley came to disprove this confident assertion.

Captain Jarvis believed that he had guarded against a sally by placing marksmen so that their rifles would cover the entrance of the cavern and the top of the breastwork; but they had grown negligent of their duties, and the sudden rush of the outlaws had completely surprised the entire party.

With a wild yell Ozark Alf and his men had darted out of the cavern, climbing to the top of the barricade, and had delivered a rapid volley, right in the faces of their besiegers.

In a moment all was confusion. Nothing could be heard but shots and cries, and little could be seen but the smoke of the conflict. But the besiegers rallied immediately, and by a close and well-directed fire drove their assailants back into the cavern.

At the conclusion of this brief engagement it was discovered that Jim Breen had been instantly killed, and that Sheriff Jarvis was slightly and another man seriously wounded.

The body of Breen was carried down to the camp at the foot of the pass, whither the wounded repaired to attend to their hurts, but not until Captain Jarvis had taken measures to guard against another sortie.

Fred Light remained on the plateau with Herman, whose short and heavy rifle had done good service in the fight. The lad was seated near the rocky pile, apparently in a deep study.

"Vot you makes now, Feddervate?" asked Herman. "Vas you played ouet?"

"Not yet, old boy. I am tryin' to get an idee through my head."

"You vas besser leaf dose idees mit demselbs. Dey brings you some more schrapes in."

"I am thinkin', Herman, that this is mighty slow work. We ain't likely to get hold of those chaps by corkin' 'em up in a bottle, and they are liable to fly out at any minute and make a scatteration among us."

"Dot vas so. Aber vot you makes mit dot?"

"It is my idee, Herman, that I must try to start some sort of a fire in the rear ag'inst 'em. I believe I will go into the hole in the rock again, and see if I can't stir up old Martin Creswell."

"Dot vas bad beeziness, Feddervate. Dot hoel vas shuffed mit schrapes full."

"But I mean to get you to stand watch at the opening, Herman, and then I won't get into any scrapes. There ain't a bit of danger when there's nobody to stop up that end."

"I shtands dot vaten, Feddervate, oond den if you cooms not ouet pooty quick, I goes in dot hoel minesellef."

"You had better not try it, Herman. You might get stuck in there, and that would make an end of both of us."

As Featherweight did not intend to go to work upon his new idea before night, he went down to the camp, and informed Sheriff Jarvis and Frank Mallory of his purpose.

"I doubt if you can do anything in there, my boy," said Jarvis, "and I don't see how the old man can help us or help himself. But you seem to be always striking something that nobody else would think of, and I reckon you had better go along if you want to."

"If you do get a chance to speak to Martin Creswell," advised Mallory, "you ought to urge him to be as patient and as calm as he can. I don't know whether it would be well to tell him about Sophie."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Sophie. "Tell my poor father that I am safe and well, and beg him for my sake to be careful of himself, as we hope soon to have him out of that den of thieves."

When the night was pretty well advanced, Featherweight let himself down from the edge of the cliff, and again entered the hole in the rock, while Herman Schweitopfel stood guard with his trusty yager, and awaited his return.

When he reached the further end of the hole, he saw a light burning in the cavern as usual, and there were two men in the main apartment, who were conversing in such low tones that he could not even catch an occasional word of what they said.

He waited impatiently, and had begun to believe that his errand would be a fruitless one, when they at last brought their conversation to a close, and went out.

Immediately he was gladdened by the appearance of Martin Creswell, who came in with his head bowed, and looking very sad and broken.

He seated himself near the hole at which Featherweight was watching, and the lad whistled as he had done before.

"Thank God!" exclaimed the old man, and he bent his head down to the hole.

"Is that you, my young friend?" he asked.

"Yes, uncle Martin; it's me."

"I have been nearly crazy to speak to you. You told me what was not true."

"About what, sir?"

"About my daughter. You said that she was here and a prisoner; but she is not. I have watched my chances, and have looked into every hole and corner in spite of them, and I know that she is not here."

"That's a fact, uncle Martin, 'cause they took her away."

"Who took her away?"

"Ozark Alf and his dad. But it's all right, uncle Martin. We spoilt their game, and got hold of her on t'other side of the mountain, and brought her around here, and she is safe and well."

"Where is she?"

"Right near here with her husband and her friends."

"Is that the truth that you are telling me?" eagerly asked the old man.

"True as Gospel, uncle Martin, and she wants me to say to you that you must take mighty good care of yourself, 'cause we hope to get you out of this afore long."

"The Lord be thanked!" exclaimed the old man. "Yes, my son, I will be careful. But I am a prisoner, and cannot get out to see my child. What shall I do?"

"Just keep your eyes open and your mouth shut, as I told you afore," warned Featherweight. "I say, uncle Martin, what have they been doin' in there lately?"

"They ran out of the cavern and had a fight. Since then they have been drinking and laughing, making their brags that they have killed several of your men. I heard their leader say to-night that they would soon clean out your party."

"It was a bad job, uncle Martin, though they only knocked one of us stiff. But that sort of thing must be stopped, and there's somethin' for you to do, if you can do it so as to keep out of a scrape."

"What is it, my son?"

"If you see any guns or pistols lyin' around with nobody to watch 'em, just slip 'em into this hole."

Martin Creswell nearly screamed for joy. He jumped at the proposition with just such boyish delight as Featherweight would have shown if the lad had found himself there in his place.

He darted across the cavern, and directly returned with a rifle, which he handed down to Featherweight.

"That had been left here," he said. "Wait a minute, and I will get another. The man who owns it is asleep."

In a few moments he brought another rifle, which he thrust into the hole.

"That's enough for now," said Featherweight, who began to fear that his experiment might result in harm to the old man.

"I can bring more," assured Martin Creswell.

"But you mustn't get excited about this thing, uncle Martin. Go easy, and keep cool. I will be here again afore mornin'. If you should happen to come across another gun or two, just slip 'em into this hole. I will show you how to move the stone. But you mustn't ever pick up one unless you are sure that nobody is lookin', and that you won't get in a scrape."

"I will be very careful, my son. You are going, then? Tell my dear child that I am dying to see her. Good-night, and God bless you!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

WHEN Featherweight had crawled back to the mouth of the hole, he found Herman Schweitopfel fretting and fuming about his long stay. But the German's anger was quickly changed to surprise and admiration, when his young friend handed up the two rifles, and explained how he had got them.

"Dese vas zwei guns vot dey von't shoot at us some more mit," consoled Herman. "Oond dot counts, by shimminy!"

Featherweight hastened down to the camp to show his prizes to his comrades, who heartily congratulated him upon his success in disarming the enemy.

"Well, you *are* a smart one," declared Sheriff Jarvis, admiringly. "I am sure that I would never have thought of such a trick. Another stroke or two like that, and those scoundrels will have to run or surrender."

But Sophie Mallory was not the least bit enthusiastic over the exploit. She was so sad and silent that Frank asked her what it was that troubled her.

"I am sorry that this has been done," she said. "I am afraid for my poor father. He is old and broken, and perhaps his mind is not as clear as it should be. He cannot take up such a task and do it with the dash and secrecy that Fred Light would use. They will be sure to suspect him when they miss their guns, and I am afraid that they will find him out and take vengeance upon him."

This expression of Sophie's fear sent Fred at once to the low grounds of sorrow. It was the very fear that had struck him sharply when he received the rifles from the old man, and the danger of the task had then occurred to him.

He told Sophie that he had cautioned her father, warning him not to do anything that might bring him into trouble, but this explanation did not seem to relieve her anxiety.

"I am awfully sorry, Miss Sophie," he said, "and I know that if anything happens to him it will be my fault; but I am going to do my best to straighten this thing out and keep him from getting into a scrape. I will go back into that hole right away, and will watch for a chance to speak to him, and will tell him that you say he mustn't hand out any more guns."

Sophie assured her young friend that she would not blame him, even if anything should happen to her father. He had believed that he was doing right, and he must pardon her for being so anxious and so easily troubled. But at the same time she thanked him for his offer, and begged him to communicate with her father as soon as possible.

Featherweight, who was greatly troubled and

perplexed, hastened to go back and enter the hole in the rock, leaving Herman to mount guard at the opening.

When he reached the further end, he was more terrified than surprised at finding a rifle lying there, which had evidently been stolen from the outlaws and thrust into the hole by Martin Creswell.

He at once began to feel sure that Sophie Mallory's forebodings would prove true, and he fairly ached to see her father and speak with him again.

But he watched and waited in vain.

When he first looked into the cavern no person was there. A light was burning dimly, but all was silence for the space of what seemed to the lad to be a long half-hour. Then Ozark Alf, his father, and another man, came in silently and mysteriously. They seemed to be much excited, but spoke so low that the lad could not hear what they said. Then they stealthily looked about the cavern, peering into all the corners and recesses. Then they conversed in whispers again, and finally concealed themselves and kept silence.

This concealment and the subsequent silence were terribly oppressive to Featherweight, who then felt sure that Martin Creswell was at least suspected, and that his outlaw relatives were bent upon catching him in the act of hiding their weapons.

The lad could do nothing but wait, and he waited more impatiently than ever for the next act of this slow but exciting drama.

At last the old man entered the cavern from some unperceived retreat, coming in as stealthily as the others had come. After looking to see if the apartment was empty, he disappeared. In a few minutes he returned, with a rifle in his hand. Again looking carefully about, to make sure that he was not observed, he approached the side of the cavern where the young spy lay concealed.

Featherweight trembled with apprehension, and was nearly driven wild by his desire to speak to the old man and warn him of his danger; but he saw Ozark Alf peep out from the corner in which he had concealed himself, and knew that it was too late to try to interfere. The mischief had been done, and he could only await the result.

Martin Creswell stopped near the hole in the rock, and raised the stone which Featherweight had shown him how to remove.

"Look out, Uncle Martin!" said the lad; but the old man did not hear that frightened whisper.

He was about to slip the rifle into the hole, when he was startled by the voice of his nephew.

"Hold on, there!" shouted Ozark Alf, as he stepped forward, and at the same moment the other two men came out from their places of concealment.

The old man turned, and stood at bay like a hunted beast.

"It is you, then," said the chief of the outlaws, "who have been robbing us of our rifles. I suspected you all the time, in spite of the big lies you told."

"How often have you lied to me?" sullenly answered the old man.

"I don't care to count lies with you. I have caught you at this game, and now I mean to settle with you."

"I have only worked for my liberty," said Martin Creswell. "For years you have kept me a prisoner, and you have robbed me of my property and of my child. My friends are on the outside, trying to free me, and my daughter is with them. I have worked for my freedom. And am glad of it."

"How the devil did you find out anything about your daughter?" asked Ozark Alf. "Well, never mind; you shall have plenty of freedom after this, in another world."

The young outlaw had drawn a pistol from his belt, and the cruel gleam of his eyes told Martin Creswell that he meant murder.

"Do you mean to kill me?" asked the old man. "Are you going to end your outrages at last with the greatest crime of all? So be it, then, I will die knowing that this den of thieves will soon be broken up, and you will all be shot or hanged."

Ozark Alf raised his pistol; but the spy in the hole had no idea of remaining an inactive spectator of the tragedy that was intended.

As Martin Creswell had removed the stone that closed the small hole in the rock, Featherweight could not only see plainly into the cavern, but also saw his way clear to make a move that might surprise somebody. If he could not prevent the death of the old man, he might at least avenge his murder.

As the outlaw chief raised his pistol, Featherweight cocked his revolver, and pointed it through the small opening into the cavern, aiming at the breast of Ozark Alf.

As Martin Creswell stood with his back against the rocky wall, his nephew took a steady aim at his head.

"You are going to get your freedom right now, as soon as I count three," said Ozark Alf. "One!"

Before he could say *Two*, Featherweight pulled trigger, and the scene changed.

CHAPTER XV.

A BARREN VICTORY.

THE concealed spy well knew that as soon as he fired his shot the hole in the rock would be disclosed, and his presence would be discovered.

Therefore he was prepared for a scamper, and he did scamper.

Without stopping to pick up the rifle that he had found there, he hastened to get back into the hole as fast as his hands and knees would carry him, so that he might keep clear of possible bullets.

The possible bullets came quickly enough. His shot was followed by such a wild and agonized yell that it sounded like a death shriek, and then the muzzles of two weapons were thrust into the hole, and two shots, that nearly deafened him, and filled the hole with smoke, forced him to his best speed through the narrow passage.

It seemed to him that he had never been so long in making the trip from one end to the other of that hole; that the rough places had never been so rough, or the close places so close. It was not that he feared for his own safety; but the terror of the scene to which he had been a witness, and his belief that he had caused the death of Martin Creswell, completely upset him, and he was seized with a wild idea of getting out and rushing to the rescue of the old man.

At last he reached the opening, and raised himself up on the platform, where, to his great surprise, he found Herman Schweitopfel asleep and snoring.

By vigorous shaking he aroused the German, who started up and stared as he noticed the pale face and wild eyes of his young friend.

"Mein Gott in Himmel!" he exclaimed. "Vot machst du, Feddervate? Vas you seen a shpook?"

"No; but I have seen a murder. Come, Herman; I am afraid that they have killed Miss Sophie's father in there, and I must go and help him."

He ran round the pile of rock, and was about to mount the breastwork at the entrance to the cavern, when Herman and another caught him and held him.

"Vot you does mit yoursellef, Feddervate?" excitedly asked the German. "Mebbe you don't vant to die yooost yet already, hey? Come by dot camp down, oond tell dot zheriff oond Vrank Mallory. Den ve all goes in dere togeder."

Featherweight yielded to the force of his friends, and he suffered himself to be led, sad and dejected, down the steep pass to the camp.

The first person he met was Sophie Mallory, who was awake and anxiously awaiting news of her father. He could not speak to her at the moment; but she read bad news in his face.

"What has happened to my father?" she asked. "Have they found him out and killed him?"

"They have found him out," feebly replied the lad, "and I am afraid they have killed him."

Sophie would have fallen to the ground if she had not been supported by her husband, who came forward with Sheriff Jarvis.

Under the questioning of the two, Featherweight told the story of his last adventure in the hole in the rock, and could not help telling it in such a manner that it confirmed the fears of Sophie.

"I did what I could to help the poor old man," he said. "I drew a bead on Ozark Alf, when I fired, and meant to hit him in the breast."

"May Heaven grant that the shot was well aimed!" exclaimed Sophie. "Perhaps they did not kill my poor father after all. Is there nothing we can do to help him?"

"That was what I was going to try when they stopped me and pulled me back," said Featherweight. "Let's all make a rush now, and get into the cavern. There's a fine chance. They have lost their rifles, and guess they are bothered some."

"Sheriff Jarvis cautiously remarked that a dog that has lost three teeth can still bite pretty hard."

"We are wasting time in talk," said Sophie.

"If anything is going to be done, it should be done right now."

"That's so!" exclaimed Fred Light. "I mean to do something, if I have to do it alone, and I am goin' into that den, if it's the last act of my life."

"I am with you, my lad," said Frank Mallory.

"And I!" "And I!" shouted two others.

"You shust bets on me all de vile, Fedder-vate," said Herman Schweitopfel.

There was no lack of volunteers, and Sheriff Jarvis, who had only feared to lose the lives of his men, consented to lead the party when he saw how willing they were to expose themselves.

It was near daybreak when they assembled on the plateau, and the sky was gray with the faint light that told of the coming dawn. It was just the time for a vigorous charge and a possible surprise.

Captain Jarvis told off the men who were to form the storming party, which included himself, Frank Mallory, and Fred Light. He stationed others where they could cover the route of the detachment, and protect its retreat if necessary.

All looked well to their rifles and pistols, and at the word of command the storming party dashed up the breastwork, which had been advanced until it nearly closed the entrance to the cavern.

As silently as possible they swarmed up the rough pile of broken rock, and as silently descended on the other side, fully expecting to be received with such a fire as would make a corpse of more than one of them.

Featherweight was the first to get over the barricade, and the first to enter the cavern. No enemy met him, and there was no person in sight.

Indeed, there was nothing in sight, not even the rocky wall of the cavern. The main apartment was not illuminated by a fire, as he had previously seen it, nor was there any light burning.

Those who had followed him over the barricade speedily overtook him, and all wondered at the absence of the enemies, and at the intense darkness and silence that prevailed.

It was necessary to have lights before the situation could be fully understood, and considerable time was used in procuring torches. When they were at last brought up, Captain Jarvis would not allow them to be taken directly into the cavern.

"Perhaps," he said, "those infernal scamps have hid themselves, hoping to make a finish of us, and when we give them a light to shoot by, they may knock us all over before we can get at them."

"I'll go in as a scout and scare 'em up," said Featherweight, and, before he could be prevented, he darted forward, with a torch in one hand and a cocked revolver in the other.

He hurriedly explored all portions of the cavern that were in sight, and returned in safety to his companions, assuring them that there was not the slightest danger, as the cavern had evidently been deserted by the outlaws.

A thorough and careful investigation of the den was then made, and the cavern was discovered to be a series of large and small apartments, all of which were connected with each other, and nearly all had been shaped and improved by the labor of the recent occupants.

In one of the large rooms were found more than a dozen horses, all of them in good condition, and some unusually fine animals were recognized by members of the party as having been stolen from people of their acquaintance. Elsewhere was a deep hole in the rocky floor, which proved to be a spring of pure and cold water, and this was a valuable find for the newcomers.

In another room were saddles and bridles and other horse gear, and blankets and various utensils were scattered about profusely; but nothing else of value could be discovered, and scarcely a morsel of food remained, for man or beast.

"They were starved out—that is clear," said Captain Jarvis, as he shook one of the empty meal sacks.

Featherweight, when the lights had been procured, had hastened to search the main apartment of the cavern, with which he had such good reason to be acquainted. Though he was in haste, he entered it with trembling and hesitation, fully expecting to find the dead body of Martin Creswell lying on the rocky floor.

He found nothing of the kind. There was a dead man there; but his face did not show the wrinkled skin and white beard of the poor old prisoner. He seemed to be the third man who

had appeared on the scene with Ozark Alf and his father, when Martin Creswell was caught with a rifle in his hand.

"How did this chap get killed?" he asked himself, "and what has become of the old man?"

"Is it my father? Is he dead?" asked Sophie Mallory, who came in at this moment with her husband, and saw Fred standing there and gazing gloomily at the corpse.

"This man is dead," he replied; "but it ain't your father."

She stepped forward, with a brighter look and a more lively gait, and calmly examined the features of the dead man.

"I think I know him," she said. "Yes, I am sure I do. He was one of those who carried me away from my home. I saw his face as we were riding up the mountain, and after I had been brought into the cavern."

"How did this man get killed, and what has become of the old gentleman?" asked the lad. "That's what's botherin' me."

"Let us hope that Mr. Creswell was not killed," said Frank Mallory. "Surely there is good reason for hope. They may have taken him away; but he must be alive, as they would not have carried off a corpse."

"It don't seem to me that he has been killed, Mr. Mallory. Will you stand right here, please? Now watch me till I show you how things were."

Featherweight crossed to the other side of the cavern, near the hole in the rock, and stood with his back against the wall.

"There," he said, pointing with his finger, "is the hole I peeped through and shot out of. Here the old gentleman stood, just as I am standin'. There Ozark Alf stood, where Mr. Mallory stands. T'other chap stood nigh where he fell. The old scamp from Memphis stood kinder out of the way. There ain't a bit of blood here, nor where Mr. Mallory stands; but there's lots of it where that chap lies. What do you make of that, now?"

"It looks to me," replied Mallory, "as if neither of the men who were aimed at was shot. Are you sure that you aimed at Ozark Alf?"

"Dead sure of that."

"Then you must have missed him. Anyhow, I don't believe that Mr. Creswell was shot here, if anywhere. They must have carried him off, and the question is, what has become of them all?"

This was the question that Sheriff Jarvis and the others were then endeavoring to solve. They had searched through all the rooms and recesses of the cavern, but had seen nothing of the outlaws, and had discovered no place of exit by which they could possibly have made their escape. So they came back to the main apartment, and reported their discouraging failure.

"They hain't gone off on horseback," said Featherweight, "and they must have slipped out by the back door."

"Just so, my boy," replied Captain Jarvis; "but where is the back door?"

"Well, sir, there's one of us who has been through there, and who hain't forgot, I reckon. I mean Miss Sophie."

"To be sure," said Sophie. "I should have spoken sooner. It opens from the place where I was imprisoned. Follow me, gentlemen."

She led the way into a low and narrow apartment of the cavern, toward the further end of which she pointed.

"There is a stone," she said, "which they pushed back when they took me out."

Immediately three men were pushing at the stone. It rolled away, leaving an opening through which the daylight came.

Featherweight was the first to slip out through the hole.

"There they are!" he shouted.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST BLOW.

FRANK MALLORY had conjectured rightly when he said that neither of the shots fired in the cavern had hit the person it was aimed at. Yet Featherweight's pistol had caused a sudden shifting of the scene.

When Ozark Alf had fully determined to make an end of Martin Creswell, he slightly changed his position before he began to count, bringing his pistol hand across his breast.

Featherweight's bullet struck his pistol, knocking it out of his hand. Glancing off from the steel barrel, the pellet of lead flew into the brain of Precious Pink, the third man of the party, who fell to the floor at once, with his death-cry on his lips.

The young chief instantly drew another pis-

tol, and ran to the other side of the cavern, followed by his father, and both fired rapidly into the hole from which the fatal shot had come.

After waiting and listening for a few moments, until they were forced to believe that they had not harmed the concealed spy, they went back and knelt by the side of Precious Pink, who was breathing his last.

"We must get out of this," said Ozark Alf, as he rose, without paying any attention at the moment to Martin Creswell.

When he saw the stock of provisions diminishing until there was scarcely any food left in the cavern for the men and the horses, he had known that he must soon escape with his band, and for that purpose had knotted together lariats and picket ropes enough to enable them to descend the cliff.

The success of his sortie had encouraged him to hope that he might beat off the besiegers and drive them away; but, when there were no provisions left, and three rifles and two men had been lost, he instantly made up his mind to slip away.

This determination was communicated to the others, who made hurried preparations to leave the cavern.

"You are going with us," said the young chief to Martin Creswell, who had not moved from the position he had taken when his life was threatened.

"I will not," stubbornly replied the old man. "I will stay here and meet my daughter. You need not think you can escape. This den of thieves is broken up, as I have often told you it would be, and you will all be shot or hanged."

"Don't bet too high on that, old man. Anyhow, you won't have a chance to take a hand in the game again. I don't know whether I will kill you or not. You may be more useful to me alive than dead. But I don't mean to leave you here."

In spite of his resistance Martin Creswell was bound hand and foot, and was dragged through the opening that was made by removing a rock at the rear of the cavern. He was then carried along the rugged mountain top, and was laid near the edge of the cliff down which his daughter had been lowered.

The new rope was already in position, and the remaining members of Ozark Alf's band were descending, with their weapons and such provisions as they had left, to the ledge at the foot of the cliff.

Ozark Alf had announced his intention of remaining above until all his comrades were safe, although the man from Memphis begged him to escape while he could.

"There ain't a bit of danger, dad," he replied. "Those folks won't be likely to tackle us at close quarters after the last lesson we gave them. Even if they should get into the cavern, it will be a long time before they find the back door."

"What will you do with this nuisance?" asked Alfred Creswell, touching the prisoner with his foot.

"That depends. I am strong enough to let him down; but I may get rid of him in an easier way than that."

When there remained only Ozark Alf and his father at the top of the cliff, the man from Memphis took his turn at descending the rope.

He had let himself down scarcely a third of the distance, when a thrilling shriek broke upon the ears of his son, who hastily looked over the edge of the cliff, and saw his father lying in a heap on the ledge below.

The man from Memphis was of heavy build, and the ropes had been insecurely knotted. Under the severe and constant strain one of the knots had slipped, and it had been Alfred Creswell's fate to be just blow that knot when the line parted.

This was a crushing blow to the chief of the outlaws. Not only had he witnessed his father's fatal fall, but he had seen his way of escape cut off.

At that moment the shout of Featherweight, as the lad emerged from the cavern, told him that his foes were upon him. The next moment he was covered by half a dozen rifles, and Sheriff Jarvis ordered him to surrender.

It was useless to think of flying, and it would be madness to show fight against such overwhelming odds. But he had a resource to fall back upon for safety.

He raised in his arms the bound and fragile form of Martin Creswell, and held him there at the edge of the cliff.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "Stand right there, or over goes this old man!"

"Save my father!" cried Sophie, as she ran

forward and seized the arm of the sheriff. "Whatever you do, save my father!"

The rifles were lowered, and Captain Jarvis began a parley with the outlaw chief, the result of which was that he was to be allowed to leave the country, and Martin Creswell was restored to his daughter, whose gratitude for his safety compensated her friends for the loss of the principal offender.

"Where is that old scamp from Memphis?" asked Featherweight, who had looked about in vain for Alfred Creswell.

"That old scamp from Memphis, as you call him," replied Ozark Alf, "lies dead at the foot of the cliff here."

"We must bury him," said Sophie.

"Never mind that. I will bury my own dead. If you will give me some rope, so that I can lengthen out this line, I will go down after him, and will give no more trouble to any of you."

He was supplied with rope, and was left to his own devices, while Sheriff Jarvis and his party returned to the cavern and prepared to leave the mountains.

The horses that were found in the outlaws' den were carried away by their captors. Those whose owners were known were returned to their owners, and the others, with the rest of the captured property, were divided among the members of Sheriff Jarvis's party.

Martin Creswell speedily gained in health and vigor, and his mind, which had been greatly weakened by his misfortunes, recovered most of its strength and clearness.

As soon as he was able to do so, he went to Memphis with his daughter and son-in-law, where the property of which he had been robbed was restored to him without much difficulty.

Fred Light and Herman Schweitopfel, at the request of their three friends, accompanied them to Memphis. Their evidence was valuable in straightening out the tangles of Martin Creswell's estate, and they received for their arduous and dangerous services such rewards as they could not refuse.

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